

This is AU in that Harry meets the twins in London, rather than his first Weasley meeting being Ron on the train. Since I've only plotted out through the first book's worth of story line, I'm not sure HOW AU it will get yet.

What if?

Harry followed Hagrid through the portal revealed by the wall of bricks in amazement. Obviously, he'd never known this kind of thing was possible, much less done. He looked around him, taking in all the people in strange outfits. Of course, to them, his clothing was strange as well, so he took that thought with a grain of salt. There were stores that sold the strange dresses he saw men and women walking around in, and stores that sold animals of all kinds. Harry stared at the store that smelled like Aunt Petunia's garden and the medicine cabinet at the same time for a few seconds, then realized he'd been temporarily left behind by his guide. As he rushed to catch up to Hagrid, he passed by a store with a lot of enthusiastic children in front, and Harry caught a glimpse of what looked like a straw broom in the window. As he continued, following Hagrid to the best of his ability, Harry wondered what was so fascinating about brooms with straw at the end. He vaguely wondered if they were so enthusiastic because the broom was much better at cleaning than most, which would cut down on the time it took to do their chores. Then Harry noticed that Hagrid had stopped in front of a large establishment that looked vaguely like a museum, not that Harry had seen many of those to judge by.

It stood several stories high, and the walls seemed to tell stories with the creatures carved into them. Some Harry had never even imagined in his wildest flights of fancy, and others seemed just like creatures he'd dreamed up late at night and when he was locked in his cupboard. Near the doors stood small beings in a uniform, seeming to both guard the doors and greet those entering at the same time. The front doors had a message carved into them, which made Harry shiver as he realized it was a threat to thieves.

"In here, 'arry," the bearded man said, as he stood, practically blocking the doorway, "We'll get you some money to buy yer supplies with. We just ask the goblins at the desk 'ere, and they'll lead us

down." By that point, Hagrid had walked Harry to one of the desks in question, where a smallish, wrinkle-skinned creature with the longest, sharpest-pointed ears Harry had ever seen sat. Its squinty eyes looked up from the desk it sat at, and peered down its long, pointy-as-its-ears nose at Harry.

"Your business here, sir?" it drawled, while still making notations in its ledger.

"Mr. Harry Potter to withdraw schooling funds from his vault," Hagrid answered for the small boy, who was utterly fascinated by the creature.

"Does Mr. Harry Potter have the key?" the goblin now looked like it was suppressing a great deal of glee at the thought of the child in front of him not having his key, and this thought made Harry look up at Hagrid worriedly. Harry hadn't a clue how to withdraw money from anywhere; he'd never even been given money before.

Hagrid blinked then muttered under his breath as he reached into his coat. He dug around for a bit, then pulled out two keys, and handed them to the goblin, "Mr. Potter's key, and the key to get You-Know-What from vault seven hundred thirteen."

At this, the goblin took the keys with a rolled eye, peered closely at both, jotted down something on the paper that must be on the desk, and handed the keys back, "Just a moment, Griphook will be with you to take you to the vault."

Prior to this point, Harry's experience with the phrase, "Just a moment," had meant at least a ten-minute wait. But apparently the goblins believed in saying it and actually meaning it, for just a moment later, another wrinkle-skinned, creature with sharp looking ears and nose approached, nodded to them and started walking to the back of the room. Hagrid followed it, and Harry rushed to not get left behind, even as he took in the seemingly endless desks and doors leading off the main room of the bank. The goblin climbed into what looked like a coal cart, and sat down. Hagrid picked Harry up and settled him into the cart, then clambered in as well.

"Keep your hands feet and anything you don't want to lose in the cart at all times," the goblin muttered as the cart began to move, "Oh, and brace yourselves."

Harry clung to the seat he perched on as the cart took each curve, bend and straightway at what felt to be a breakneck speed. At one point, a jet of smoke shot past the cart, and Harry jumped, looking briefly down the side of the cart. After realizing that he could neither see anything nor was he still within the walls of the cart, Harry jerked back and looked at Hagrid questioningly, "What was that?"

"That might 'ave been a Gringott's dragon," Hagrid looked a little green with the speed and swerves of the trip, "They guard the levels of the vaults. They're also part of the reason why Gringotts has never been broken into."

At this, Harry remembered the ominous message carved into the walls at the entrance of the building, and nodded to himself. He figured the message was another part of why the bank had never been broken into. They reached a leveling point in the ride, and the goblin pulled a lever on the cart. It then careened toward an embankment with huge walls attached. It finally began to slow down as it approached the ground, and reached a stop as it lightly bounced on the bracers at the end of the track.

From there, the goblin led Harry and Hagrid to a door, and took one of the keys from Hagrid. It stuck the key in a lock. Seconds later, Harry could hear gears grinding and screeching as the door slowly swung open. Harry goggled at the piles of coins, and could just barely see that each pile was one of three colors: gold, silver, and bronze. He followed Hagrid in as the large man walked to a pile, pulled out a small bag and filled it with money. Tying it off, he handed the bag to Harry, "There you go, it ought to last you at least through the year. Jus so's you know, the gold ones are Galleons, the silver are Sickles, and the bronze you should remember are Knuts. And it takes twenty-nine Knuts to make a Sickle, and seventeen Sickles to make a Galleon. Got that?"

Boggling some more, Harry scrambled to tuck away the bag of money as he followed Hagrid back out the door. The goblin closed it,

and pulled the key from the lock. More grinding and screeching signaled that the door was completely closed and locked again, and with that, all three climbed back into the cart and made another high-speed, Hagrid-turning-green trip through the catacombs.

This time, Hagrid had Harry stay in the cart. The goblin reached out to the door, and stuck in the key, like before, and then scratched the surface of the door lightly. Hagrid piped up, "And if anyone gets too close to the door when it's locked, they get sucked into the vault itself until the next time the goblins check."

Daunted, Harry almost didn't ask, but felt he'd better, "And how often do they do that?"

Grinning, Griphook showed all of his viciously pointed teeth, "Roughly every ten years, we do sometimes forget and check even less frequently though." This said as the huge man walked to the newly opened door, and pulled out a bagged item, quickly tucking it into one of the pockets of his coat, "There we go," he said as he climbed back into the cart.

The ride back was just as interesting as the ride down had been. Figuring that the ride would be slower, Harry was surprised by the speed of the uphill climb and enjoyed the trip even more. A quick glance at Hagrid told the child that Hagrid was even less thrilled now than he'd been on the way down. No one was happier than Hagrid upon reaching ground level again, and the cart rocked with the alacrity the man employed in removing himself from it. Harry scrambled out so as to not be left behind, and followed his guide back out of the bank.

As he was led past that store with all the kids crowded around again, Harry saw more than just the broom with a straw tail. He saw pictures of people riding said brooms, and waving at the people staring through the glass. Harry stopped for a second in amazement. He never would have imagined people would actually try riding brooms.

"Firs' years aren't allowed to have brooms, 'arry," Hagrid had stopped when the boy did, "but that don't mean you can't enjoy lookin'. Yer da' played Quidditch, not surprisin' that you'd be fascinated too."

"Actually," Harry blinked, "I was just amazed at the thought of people being utterly fascinated with brooms. I didn't know there was a way to make them anything more than cleaning tools."

Hagrid nodded with a puzzled expression on his face, "Eh, well Muggles 're odd like that. Fancy using brooms to clean when a simple spell would do it fer you in a blink!"

Finally they moved on, towards a bookstore, where Hagrid told Harry he'd be back with Harry's birthday present and would give it to him when Harry came back from buying the books on his class list. Walking inside, Harry stared up at all of the books, and finally, shyly approached the man at the desk, "Sir, I'm going to be a first year at Hogwarts, where do I look for the books on my list?"

"Ah," the man said, looking up only briefly, "I know just which books you need, if you give me a few minutes, I'll have them ready for you. You can look around for a bit while you wait, if you like?"

Nodding, Harry wandered a little bit within the store. He didn't exactly pay attention to where he was until he bumped into someone. Apologizing quickly, Harry flinched back, and looked at whom he'd nearly knocked over. He blinked a few times as he took in the red hair, freckles and laughing eyes of not one, but two boys who looked to be two years older than he was.

"Oh, do excuse us," the one on the left said.

"We were just engrossed in our favorite subject, and didn't realize we were blocking the way," the one on the right waved a hand through the area around him.

"It's okay," Harry replied, "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"You're going to be a first year aren't you?" the duplicate on the right asked, peering closely at Harry.

"Yes," Harry looked up cautiously at them.

"Ah, that's good," Left side nodded, "Well, to be polite, we'll introduce ourselves. I'm Fred Weasley, and he's my twin, George."

"No no no no," Right side shook his head, "I'm Fred, and he's MY twin George."

As the two playfully bickered over who was Fred and who was Fred's twin George, Harry smiled, and began to quietly chuckle, "Can't one of you be George and the other his twin Fred?"

They looked at him as they suddenly stopped play-bickering, "Well, I suppose I could be George and he my twin Fred," the one on the right said.

"Oh, but I like it better that I'm Fred, and you're my twin George," Left side teased as he leaned on his twin.

"At least I know which is Fred and which is George now," Harry grinned.

"Oh do you?" Right side smirked.

"You both just agreed that you," pointing to the left, "are Fred, and you, "pointing to the right, "are George, so sure, I know which is which."

"Ah, but I could be Fred and him George," 'George' countered.

"Yes, could be," Harry liked this game, "but you both just agreed on who was whom, so now you have to live with it, even if you are still arguing over who is the twin of whom."

"I like this one, Gred," 'George' smirked at his twin.

"Yes, Forge, I think he'll fit in nicely," 'Fred' smirked back.

At this point, Harry realized that neither twin cared who was 'Fred' and who was 'George,' nor did they care who was someone's twin. He shook his head and sighed, "Okay, so now we've got that out of the way, my name is Harry Potter."

"Really?" Fred raised an eyebrow, "You poor thing, I'd hate to be you, what with all the scar-gawkers out there."

"Have you got your books yet?" George pointed at the books the twins were looking at, "we're just window shopping at books we'd like to get. Our mum's already got ours from our older brothers."

"What's Hogwarts like," Harry asked.

"There's so many opportunities to test our products out," George grinned.

"We almost have more opportunities than we know what to do with," Fred agreed.

"But we make do," George laughed, "The school itself isn't bad, and the professors, except for Binns are okay, but we're not there so much for the learning, as to perfect our jokes."

"What's so bad about Professor Binns?" Harry asked, imagining a cruel person who wouldn't let you even breathe without permission.

"He's just so boring you fall asleep inside of ten minutes," Fred shrugged, "Now Potions and Transfiguration are loads of fun."

"Ample chances for pranks," George continued.

"And interesting enough that we don't sleep in class," Fred finished, "though we could do without the Slytherins breathing down our backs sometimes."

"What's a Slytherin?" Harry was puzzled, figuring that he'd learn enough about the two classes with the books.

"Didn't anyone explain it to you?" Fred blinked, "Slytherin's one of the Houses of Hogwarts." At Harry's head shake and continued puzzled expression, he added, "the other three are Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff."

"We're in Griffindor," George put his two cents worth in, "And it's the best of the four."

"Ravenclaw's for the brainy kids, the ones who like to read all day long and don't care about much else," Fred listed.

"Hufflepuff's for the ones who wouldn't hurt a fly if it hadn't hurt them first," George mentioned.

"And Slytherin's for the sneaky ones," Fred hurried to add, "But not that they're all bad," he shrugged, "just sneaky."

"They can't be all bad," George agreed, "or they'd have been disallowed from the school a long time ago."

"Besides," Fred finished, "it's not like the rest of the school's perfect. I mean, us for example."

"Kings of pranks, best at getting away, prime points losers, and all around trouble makers," the twins alternated with each phrase. Harry started to feel as though he was watching a game of tennis. He grinned a little bit all the same.

"Well," Fred sighed, "We've got to go, to peruse the joke shop's supplies."

"We'll see you at school, Harry," George waved a hand as they left, "Take care of yourself, and we might just have a job for you at the school!"

Puzzled as to what job they could mean, Harry wandered the store a little more, and found a book on wizarding culture, one on Herbology, and a few supplemental books for the rest of his classes too. He figured it would be best to prepare for the school before he got there, after all, he'd had eleven years to get used to the culture of his old school. So he might as well get started now for the new school, since it seemed he was expected to already know all this anyway.

When he had found all the books he wanted, Harry returned to the front desk, where his class books were waiting. Combining the two

piles, the bookstore owner totaled it up, and Harry paid from the pouch Hagrid had filled earlier. Not sure how to carry all the books out, Harry paused, but the storekeeper simply cast a quick spell that shrunk the books and handed the newly resized pile to Harry, who gingerly took them

As he left the store, Harry spotted the groundskeeper of Hogwarts, not a difficult task, mind you, and approached him. Hagrid held out a wire cage with a snowy white owl in it. As he peered in at her, Harry smiled gently, thinking she was beautiful.

"Here you go, 'arry, yer very own owl," Hagrid waved the cage a little, then pointed at the large trunk the cage rested on, "and this'll be yer trunk fer school."

"What's the owl for?" Harry asked, puzzled, but still happy with the gift.

"Wizards get their mail by owl, 'arry," Hagrid explained, "So if you have an owl of your own, like this gal here, you'll have an easier time of it."

"Oh," Harry gingerly set the cage on the case, and thinking of a name, asked, "I can name her, right?"

"Oh, yeah," Hagrid nodded enthusiastically, "It'll help you identify her and identify with her, and that'll make her more willing to carry your mail for yeh."

"I think I'll call her Hedwig," Harry vaguely remembered hearing that name in his history classes, he thought.

Taking the trunk and cage, Harry walked along the road behind Hagrid, as the man led him to a store named Madame Malkin's. At the door, Hagrid spoke up, I'll leave you here 'arry, to get sized for yer robes, and when yer done with that, ye can go across the road to Ollivander's to get yer wand. While yer doin' that, I'll get the Potions supply kit ye'll need at school."

Opening the door and peering inside the robe shop, Harry spotted a silver-haired boy standing on a pedestal as a witch circled around him with a tape measure flitting about the boy's wrists, arms and his head. Without turning around, the witch called out, "If you'll stand on the platform, an assistant will get to you right away."

Harry climbed on top of the box not far off and stood there for just a bit. As he waited, the blond boy already being measured looked him over, with a sneer that even Harry could recognize. As the assistant witch started measuring Harry with her own tape measure that flew about independently, the other boy piped up, "My name is Draco Malfoy, and I'll be a first year at Hogwarts in September."

Hesitantly, Harry peered at the other boy through his mangled glasses and his scraggly bangs, "I'm Harry, and I'll be a first year too."

"Which house do you think you'll be in," the boy continued without pausing for an answer, "I'm sure to be in Slytherin, as my entire family has only ever been in that house, though I suppose Ravenclaw would be acceptable to my parents as well."

"Uhm," Harry thought about it for a second, "I think I'd be best off in Ravenclaw, I'm certainly not nice enough to be Hufflepuff, and I don't think I have the qualities for the other two houses, so probably Ravenclaw."

The other boy nodded shortly, as the witch measuring him finished. He stepped down and said as he left, "See you in September, and we'll see which houses we're in, hm?"

When the measuring tape finished flying around Harry, the assistant witch told him he could step down. The first witch looked at the notes jotted down and quickly went to the back room. She reappeared quickly with an armful of robes, which she handed to Harry, telling him they would work at least for this year. He was, in her words, to come back next year for a remeasure, to ensure that he hadn't outgrown his robes.

Crossing the street to Ollivander's, Harry opened the trunk and stowed away the robes and his books then stepped inside the store. The dark interior smelled a little musty, and was definitely quite dusty. He looked around at what looked like bookcases, but had smallish boxes set inside the shelves, rather than books. As he approached one shelf of boxes, a thin voice sounded over his shoulder, causing the boy to jump.

"Ah Mister Potter," a thin, pale man with even thinner and paler hair spilling around his head and hanging over his circle-shaped glasses stood behind the desk Harry was next to, "I've been waiting to see you in here. It seems like just yesterday I sold your parents their wands. Ah, but I digress. You will be needing your wand for school and it is my job to see that you get it." With that, the man reached into a shelf for a series of boxes, opened them one at a time, and handed each individual stick to Harry. He allowed Harry to hold onto them just long enough to feel the wood against his fingertips, before whisking them right back out of his grip. After about five sticks, the man left it in Harry's hands, and nodded at him, "Well, give it a swish, lad."

Harry waved the wand gingerly, and blinked as the accrued pile of boxes went flying off the desk. The man quickly took the stick from the boy, and muttering under his breath, disappeared into the aisles of shelves. He quickly returned with another boxed wand, and handed it to Harry, who waved it even more gently than the first. This time, the man's thinning toupee flew off his head, and Harry paled, figuring that by this point the man was going to tell him there was no wand for him, he really wasn't a wizard, or that everyone had been pulling an elaborate prank on him and he fell for it like the dupe he was. As Harry fretted, the man walked back into the aisles again, and disappeared for a minute or two. When he returned, he carried a small box in his hands, and he almost reverently removed the lid, and pulled the wand from the soft cloth it rested on. He handed the stick to Harry and like with the rest of the wands, named the pieces used to create it, "Holly, 11 inches, with a phoenix tail feather core," as Harry took it, the wand felt warm in his fingers and it shot golden sparks from its tip. The man nodded and put the box aside, "That is quite interesting. You see, the phoenix that gave that tail feather only ever gave one other feather. The wand made in that case would be brother wand to yours, and the wizard I sold it to, happens to be the

one who gave you the scar on your forehead, lad. Knowing this, I tell you that you are destined for great things, as he was." At Harry's disbelieving look, "Yes, he was destined for great things. Great, horrible things, but great things all the same. Let not this scare you, child."

"These great things wouldn't have anything to do with my House at Hogwarts would they?" Harry tried to calm himself, he didn't like the idea of having the same core in his wand as that of the one who killed his parents.

"To a degree," Ollivander started tidying the boxes scattered about, "Each house helps a child learn what their traits are. They are meant to represent the core of a child as they live and grow. For example, the Slytherins trust none but themselves as life has dealt them a hard hand, often they forget to consider this as they seek revenge against those who've wronged them. The Hufflepuffs are those who have the ability to make friends, trusting in all, until that trust is taken away. The Ravenclaws prefer to research, plan, and theorize, rather than act, and those of Gryffindor are the brave, those who would do rather than wait."

Thanking the man and paying for his wand, Harry left the store, feeling a little more knowledgeable about the Houses of Hogwarts. As he stepped outside, Harry blinked at the sunlight, and spotted Hagrid sitting in a chair by the door. As the tall man stood, he reached into one of the multitude of pockets in his jacket and pulled out a kit. He handed it to Harry, who noticed it was marked for Potions, and asked if Harry liked his wand. Harry nodded as he put the kit into the trunk. Harry wondered how to hide the trunk, and yet still be able to read the books he needed to, to learn more about what he was getting into. Finally he asked Hagrid, and the large man mentioned there was a spell that shrunk things. Harry mumbled the words he'd heard the shopkeeper in the bookstore say as he shrunk Harry's books, and Hagrid nodded. Then he shrunk Harry's supplies, and unshrunk the books, so Harry could read them before starting school. As they left Wizarding London, and Harry happily put the trunk in his pocket, and the books into a bag Hagrid lent him. Luckily it looked on the worn side, so the Dursleys shouldn't get too mad about him having a big

expensive bag, and might even leave the books alone. If they bothered to look at all.

Hagrid led the shy boy back through Muggle London, he put the boy on the train back home, and gave him a ticket for the ride to the school. He also gave instructions as to the time to catch the train. Sadly, Harry didn't think to look at the Platform number until he got back to Privet Drive, and thus couldn't ask Hagrid about Platform nine and three quarters.

Okay, first off, I realize I have some events in Wizarding London rearranged. I kind of like them this way. Now I just need to know if there is more description needed, or if I'm gasp too descriptive. Comma check would be nice, but is not mandatory. My computer has a rudimentary grammar check, so any other fine-tuning in that department would be nice. As well as typos. Hate those. Lastly, is this a good start?

(Just a quick edit, someone pointed something out to me, thanks AnnF! Also, thanks to Kyuukami for the edit on Madam Malkin. Finally getting the disclaimer typos fixed while I'm at it.)

Upon his return to number four, Privet Drive, Harry was amazed at the change wrought in his absence. Or rather, the lack thereof. His things had been not been moved from Dudley's second bedroom, and even though his cousin complained loudly, Harry was actually allowed to remain there for the rest of the summer. Of course, Uncle Vernon was quick to tell Harry in no uncertain terms what he was to do with his 'unnatural,' 'freakish' school supplies, and he stowed them away quick as he could without revealing to the Dursleys as a whole that he even had them. He left them to believe that he'd given them to Hagrid for safekeeping. Except for Hedwig and the books, that is. As far as Hedwig was concerned, they allowed her into Harry's room on sufferance. He had to swear she'd make no noise, leave no mess, and that the neighbors would never see her flying out his window at night. In the case of the books, he told the Dursleys that there was a chance of having assignments right off, and if he was kicked out of the school for failing, that'd be all the sooner he'd have to come back. They agreed it was a good idea for Harry to be ready for classes, so he was allowed to spend a couple hours at night, after his chores were done, reading the books he'd bought. Thus, by the time he was supposed to head for the train, Harry had actually ploughed through *Hogwarts: A History*, and most of his supplemental books. He'd even touched on the forewords in many of his class books, to ensure he was as prepared as possible.

The day arrived that Harry was to go to the train station, and Uncle Vernon, amidst loud complaints, drove Harry to the station on his way to work in the morning. Once at the station, he all but pushed Harry out of the car with the cage containing Hedwig, and the tires squealed as he ripped back out of the parking space. Reading the ticket Hagrid had given him as they left London, Harry wondered yet again if he was being set up for a prank. There was no such thing as Platform 9 3/4, the platforms ran in whole numbers, not fractions. Harry had never ridden a train before, but even he knew that. Sighing heavily, he stood around, watching the two platforms, wondering if there was a magic time during each hour that would reveal a door somewhere that would be marked with the number 9 3/4. After some watching, Harry spotted a familiar shock of color. He'd never seen so much of it, but the particular shade of red reminded him of the twins he'd met in Wizarding London. Screwing up all the courage he had, Harry

approached them and asked, "Pardon, but would any of you happen to know a Fred or George Weasley?"

The woman who turned to look at him gasped and then smiled, "Oh, dearie, you shouldn't sneak up like that. But, yes, I do know both Fred and George," her she waved at a pair of boys standing together just a ways off, "In fact, they are two of my sons. You must be a first year. That's fine lad, we'll help you reach the train. We're just waiting for my youngest son to get out of the bathroom. FRED! GEORGE!" she hollered at the twins, "You've a friend here asking about you!"

With that, the twin heads bobbed up and their faces lit with laughter at recognizing Harry. They quickly approached, with their trunks on carts, "Harry, where's your trunk, and supplies?" one asked.

"Hagrid made them small for me," Harry pulled the shrunken objects out of his pocket, and gently set Hedwig's cage on the ground, "You don't suppose I could get someone to fix that, do you?"

"When we get on the other side of the barrier, sure, "the other twin nodded, "Mum'll probably be happy to, but first we have to get to the other side, can't let the Muggles witness anything unusual."

Harry nodded, and spotted a red-haired boy about his height walking up quickly, and approached the twin's mother. Harry guessed it was the youngest son. Looking around, he spotted a smaller girl, and another boy standing and waiting. The tallest boy wore a badge on his chest proudly, emblazoned with the letter 'P,' and Harry wondered if he had that much trouble with forgetting his name that he needed the first letter on his chest just to remind him of it. With the smallest redhead boy back among the family, the decision to cross the barrier was swiftly made. The oldest boy looked around quickly, and then dashed through, pushing his cart ahead of him. Harry blinked as he disappeared, "Wha?"

"You have to cross quickly," one twin spoke up, as both lined up for their turn.

"If you like," the other twin nodded, "You can take it at a run, might be okay for you to catch a ride on one of our trunks, since you can't with yours."

"Not on your life Fred!" his mother harped, "it's too dangerous!"

"Aw mum," the scolded twin teased, "You should know by now I'm George!"

"Oh fine," she sighed, looking back and forth as if she were looking for proof, "I'm sorry Fred, George, behave yourself!"

"Nah, mum," the fist twin cracked as both dashed through the barrier, "You had it right the first time, I am George!" With that, they disappeared through the wall.

"You'll have to wait to cross with Ginny and I," the woman sighed again, "it's easier this way, though you'll be shorter on time. We'll just have to unshrink your things quickly, and have the twins stow your things. Hopefully they'll wait around for that before gallivanting off with their friends to pull pranks. Those two, I swear. If they concentrated half so hard on school work as on their pranks."

By this time the youngest boy had waited for a lull in people around and had dashed across the barrier himself. With that, the family matriarch led Harry and her daughter to the wall, and leaned against it, "Relax child, when no one is looking, we'll cross, but brace yourself, or you'll fall all the way through."

With a gasp, Harry realized what she was talking about as the wall gave way under their weight. He caught himself before falling to the ground and gawked a bit at the large red train parked there. It was blowing steam and whistling, and a conductor was calling for all boarding to hurry up. With that, Harry pulled his supplies out of his pocket again, and handed them to the woman. She set them on the ground, pulled a wand, tapped them and muttered a few words. In an instant, the trunk was normal in size again. Harry looked around and spotted the twins grinning as they approached.

"Here, mate," the one on the left grabbed Harry's owl cage, and the one on the right took the trunk, "We'll get these stowed for you, you find a place on the train."

Nodding, he thanked their mother, and the twins, while resolving to find something that would identify one twin from the other. He clambered onto the train and found an empty compartment. He sat, pulled the bag of books off his back and pulled one out to continue where he'd left off. After a short while, the door slid open. A red head poked through and the youngest boy who'd been in the twins' family peered through, "Do you mind if I sit here, my brothers are with their friend Lee Jordan, who's got a tarantula in their compartment," said with a shiver, "and the other compartments are full."

Briefly wondering about the shiver, Harry shrugged, "I don't mind if you don't mind my reading."

After a bit longer, the redhead broke the silence again, "I heard that Harry Potter's on this train, you wouldn't happen to be him, would you? My mum explained what the Potter family generally looks like, and you match, and the twins said you went by the same name, so I guess it would be just strange to have two kids in the same place by the same name, but I figured I'd better ask."

Finally looking up, Harry nodded, still not sure what was so special about him or his name that everyone and their cat seemed to know him. It really made no sense at all to him that what he'd 'done' as an infant would get him so much attention now. Then the boy asked about the scar on Harry's head, and blinking, he pulled his bangs away from it to show it in all its jagged glory.

"Wicked," the boy breathed, blinked, and then stammered, "I'm Ron Weasley, though you probably already knew what family I'm from, what with my brothers and all. I'm the youngest boy, and the girl is my sister, Ginny, she'll be starting Hogwarts next year."

"How many kids do your parents have," Harry asked, he'd never seen a family so large.

"Six boys, and a girl," Ron listed quickly, "Oldest, Bill, works for Gringotts, next, Charlie, is living on a Dragon reserve, then there's Percy, who's so proud to be a Prefect for his fifth year, the twins, me, then Ginny."

Having returned to reading about halfway through the listing, Harry just hummed an acknowledgement. Ron sat quiet for a bit after that, then offered one more question, "Why are you reading so much?"

One more time, Harry looked up, "I didn't know anything about the Wizarding world until Hagrid came to deliver my letter to Hogwarts. He had to because my relatives wouldn't let me read it otherwise. So I'm trying to learn as much as I can before hand."

"Oh," Ron blinked, then pulled an old looking rat out of his pocket, and from another, a wand that looked to be in just a little better shape, "This is my rat, Scabbers. He used to be Percy's but since he made Prefect, mum and dad got him his own owl. The rest of us have to use the family how, Errol. Scabbers doesn't do anything though. I think it might be because he's too old, but all the same Fred and George taught me a spell to turn his tail yellow." Ron set the rat on his lap and as Harry opened his mouth to mention that Fred and George pulled pranks like most people breathe, the door to the compartment slid open and a brown bundle of hair peeped through. Much like when Ron had poked his head in, all you could see was the hair. In this girl's case, her hair took up a lot more space than Ron's. She paused as she saw the wand pointed at the rat, "Have either of you seen a toad? There's a boy a few compartments back named Neville who's lost his."

Both boys shook their heads, Harry quickly closed his mouth, and Ron blinked. The girl then called attention to the wand, "You were getting ready to cast a spell? Let's see it."

Shrugging, the redhead started waving the stick back and forth gently as he spoke a small poem, ending with "Turn this fat rat's tail yellow," and jabbing the wand at the tail. Having read a little, Harry suspected that spells weren't poems, didn't require that much movement, and certainly didn't end with a poke at an object, so he wasn't all that surprised when nothing happened. Neither was the girl, apparently.

"Are you sure that's a real spell?" She drawled skeptically.

"Well," the boy shrugged again, "My brothers could have been joking with me again. They don't take much seriously at all."

"What I've read so far," Harry pointed at his books, "Doesn't seem to say that spells require a whole poem to work. It didn't look like you were supposed to poke your target either."

Ron looked thoughtful, then nodded, "Makes sense. Just thought I'd give it a shot, yeah?"

The girl rolled here eyes as she stalked off, to search other compartments for the missing toad. After a few more minutes of silence and Harry reading to himself, the compartment door slid open again. This time, framing a trio of boys, two taller and darker, the third pale and nearly colorless, but for the school robes already adorning his small frame. He stalked into the room just a bit, pausing as he spotted Ron, "Well," he drawled, "I heard that Harry Potter was in this compartment," here he nodded at Harry, "You must be him."

Harry looked up from his book and nodded slightly, wondering if he'd have to move his bangs again. Ron, flustered a little at the stares he was receiving from the darker boys behind the third, piped up, "Well, it isn't like we don't know who you are either, Malfoy, why don't you just go back to your compartment, and leave us be?"

Smirking, the pale boy looked squarely at Ron and the very tone of his next words made it clear what he thought of the redhead, "I don't care to, just yet. You see, it's just as easy to tell, by your red hair, freckled face, and moth-eaten robes smothered with patches, that you're a Weasley. Too many children and no brains to share between the lot of you, my father always says."

Huffing, Ron puffed up a little at the insults, and tried to return in his own volley, "Better a family with too many children than one with no soul. Or did your daddy really expect people to believe he isn't a Death Eater without a cause?"

Peering at both boys arguing, Harry blinked a little. This seemed more like a family grudge to him than anything else. He looked at the two larger boys, and it seemed that they felt the same way, each was trying to edge to a corner of the doorway they blocked. Harry looked again at the arguing pair, and wondered to himself why the paler one had come to the compartment, besides wanting proof of 'Harry Potter's' presence.

Apparently that thought broadcast itself to the boys around him, because Malfoy turned his attention from the youngest Weasley to Harry again, "Well, Potter, if you're looking to get in with the right crowd, I can help you. After all, you wouldn't want all of your allies to be penniless, witless, fools who have more children than rabbits, would you?"

Personally, Harry thought this was a rather rude way of asking for friendship, and told himself that he should be smacked if he ever applied anything like that to his own life. Shaking his head, Harry voiced his opinion, "I don't much care about money or how many family members my friends have. I do know, though, that I don't like idiots or rude people, and while you might not be the first, you're sure coming off as the second. Pardon me, if I reserve judgement on who to call friend just yet." With that, Harry returned to his books, hoping that the blonde would get the point. After a little more bickering between the active members of what seemed like a family feud, the trio left Ron and Harry to their compartment.

"You might want to be careful of Malfoy, mate," Ron spoke up after he calmed down from the visiting trio, "His whole family has been dark for ages, and they have always been in Slytherin too. That House has produced the worst sort of witches and wizards, and I just know that Malfoy's going to set a new standard."

"I asked your brothers about the Houses," Harry looked Ron in the eyes, "and they said that while Slytherin wasn't as good as Gryffindor, biased as they might be, that Slytherin couldn't be all bad, or it wouldn't exist any more. They also said that the other houses weren't all good too."

"You-Know-Who's forces were made up of Slytherins," Ron tried to explain, "that's all I'm saying, and Malfoy's dad was one of them."

"So I should read Slytherin as being the same as evil?" Harry kept his eyes trained on Ron.

"Well, no," Ron muttered, "But they aren't angels either."

"No one is," Harry shook his head as the door came sliding open yet again, revealing the bushy-haired girl from earlier.

"There's an awful ruckus going on. The others are running around, being silly little children," she grumbled, "They're talking about Harry Potter being on the train and just acting like kids. And that Neville boy still hasn't found his toad."

"Well," Harry was confused, "why is that important to us?"

The girl huffed a little, "Just so you know, the train's approaching the school," she peered at their clothes, and they noticed she was already in her school robes, "You should change."

After she left, the boys followed her suggestion, Harry realizing that was the reason Mrs. Weasley had insisted on him keeping a set with him when the twins got ready to load his trunk into a storage compartment on the train.

After the train came to a stop, the children clambered off in a hurried but orderly fashion, each eager to get to the school for different reasons. At first, Harry stared at the carriages that sat there, without anything to draw them along, as older students climbed in, in groups of four or five. Then he heard Hagrid hollering about first years gathering to him, and looked up in the gathering gloom of the setting sun for the giant, who by this point, was surrounded by at least two dozen kids. The huge man led all the children to a dock, where boats were moored, and told them to ride four to a boat. At this, Harry wondered why they didn't just climb into the carriages like the older kids. Still, he shrugged and climbed into a boat, happening to be riding with Ron, the girl who'd popped into the train cabin, and the boy who'd apparently lost his toad. Said toad happened to pop up in

Hagrid's hands, and the small boy paled when the looming man returned 'Trevor' just as the quartet settled into their water-logged craft.

After everyone was accounted for, Hagrid started the boats moving on the water, and kept up a running commentary the entire time. Harry listened with half an ear, but also kept his eyes open, staring at the sky, the forest far off that seemed a little darker than any forest Harry had ever seen before- few as that had been- and even scanning the water below them. He flinched when a tentacle floated up from the depths and brushed the side of the boat. He was quite happy to see the end of that ride by the time they reached the docks closest to the school. The view of the school itself was breathtaking. Turrets barely visible climbed to meet the clouds in the sky, with what looked like gargoyles settled in various spots on the roof. One large tower stood in the middle of the structure, with four others located around it, in a radial arrangement. Even further back, Harry could just make out the signs of at least four more towers that were covered in banners, and flags flapping in the wind.

Eventually, the entourage of boats floated under the main structure of the building, and the huge man leading this expedition climbed out of his boat. He encouraged all of the children to follow suit, and double-checked that 'Trevor' hadn't gone anywhere. Leading the cluster to a large pair of doors, Hagrid knocked, with a thunderous boom, on the left door, and waited for a second or two. When the doors opened, revealing a tall woman in dark robes, hair pulled back into a sever bun, Hagrid nodded to her.

"They're all yours, Professor McGonagall," Hagrid nodded again and left.

"All right, children," Harry started to think her face was permanently set in the expression that resulted from eating a lemon one thought was an orange as she continued, "Hogwarts has a rich history of educating children in the use of their magic. While at this school, it is your responsibility to represent the codes of the school in a beneficent manner. This means that you will not break the rules set before you, lest you lose points for your House, or earn yourself detention. The Houses of the school are there for your protection and

socialization. They will be much as your home was prior to arriving. What benefits one member benefits all, and that which harms one, will harm all. Breaking rules will result in point deductions leveled against your House, and said deductions will be reflected at the end of the year, when the House Cup is awarded."

The children began chattering lightly to themselves, and looking around quickly. She silenced them with a look, as Harry began to wonder about this House business making any sense. He really didn't want his House to be just like the one he left. He tuned back into her speech in time to hear, "Line up in two columns, spruce yourselves up and look ahead of you. We will be walking through these doors to your first glimpse of the school, the Great Hall, and your fellow students, and you certainly wouldn't want to make a fool of yourself this early, now would you?"

With that, the severe-looking woman turned her back to the two columns of children lined up, and led them through the doors. Many children looked up into the sky, and Harry realized after a few seconds that this must be the charm that Hogwarts: A History had indicated that made the Great Hall so interesting. With that in mind, he began looking around at the four tables arrayed in the large room. With the children walking in columns as they were, both rows had two tables on either side, which should have created a sense of unity, but even Harry could tell that things were far from even. On the one side of the room, there was a table in red and gold, whose inhabitants seemed to have the highest level of pride in themselves. Next to them, and closer to the new students, were children at a table of black and yellow, who seemed friendly enough, but the air around them seemed more humble. On the other side, to the far left, the students sitting at the green and silver table held themselves stiffly, and Harry sympathized, remembering having to hold himself like that when the rest of the school would have nothing to do with him, fearing Dudley. Finally, the table closest to the left was covered in blue and grey, and the occupants all seemed lost in books, even those who didn't have their noses buried in one.

Amidst these observations, Harry heard some small squeals and gasps, as the other students spotted people flying past. Harry looked closely and realized he could see through these flying individuals,

and wondered if they were anything like the ghosts told of in stories back at his old school. It didn't seem like it, as only two of the spirits floating around even looked remotely dangerous, and one of those two seemed like the Weasley twins with a darker edge. His attention was caught by the four legged stool at the very back of the room, where the professors sat at a long table, and Professor McGonagall stood. She tapped her wand on the stool, and Harry spotted a hat, shaped like the ones on the heads of the students, but in much worse shape. It needed mending, and washing, and the top of it looked like it just might come off the next time someone touched it, the rip was so large.

It was all he could do to stay standing when the rip in the hat began moving animatedly on its own, the hat approximating the movements of a human mouth as it sang a song about the four houses of the school and the traits found in them. The students and professors all clapped, some merely politely, when it finished and sketched a bow as best as a bit of cloth could.

"When I call your name, you will walk to the stool, place the Sorting Hat on your head, and sit. When it calls out a House, you will join your new housemates at their table, and wait until the Sorting is done," she paused for a beat, to ensure that all had heard her. Calling each name one by one, Harry was intrigued by the time lapses. Sometimes, the hat would barely touch the skull of the next child before it was screeching a name, and in other cases, like Granger, Hermione it took quite a while. Harry recognized her as the girl from the train at about the same time as the hat called out Gryffindor for her. Another instance of the hat taking a while to Sort someone was Longbottom, Neville. Harry thought that if the hat could decide where to put that boy, it should be able to find a place for him, but he still wasn't sure, when the hat finally called out Gryffindor, if the place it settled him would actually fit.

With his questions about the Houses getting answered three different ways by three different people, Harry had a general idea of what to expect with each house. So he wasn't in the slightest surprised to hear that Malfoy, Draco did get into Slytherin, like the pale boy had figured he would. It seemed to Harry that a good portion of what House one was Sorted into was determined by which one a person

wanted to be sorted into. Which was half of Harry's problem. He didn't think he was smart enough for Ravenclaw, brave enough for Gryffindor, friendly enough for Hufflepuff, or sneaky enough for Slytherin. So he wondered if the hat would just say, "ah HA, what do you think you're doing here, you silly child, you don't belong," or something to that effect. In fact, he was so lost in thought, that when Ron nudged him in the shoulder, Harry was at first confused. Then he realized that McGonagall was calling out, "Potter, Harry" for the second time, and the whole hall had fallen into a hushed sort of whispering state.

Hesitantly, Harry stepped toward the stool, hat and expectant Professor McGonagall, and took the hat from her hand, settling it on his head. He found himself lost in pitch-black surroundings, with a voice whispering in his ears, "Ah, you're another difficult one. Don't be afraid, I like a challenge. Now, where to put you. You've a solid brain in that skull and you're loyal enough to those that deserve it. You're not afraid to stand up for yourself and others either. Most pointedly though, I believe, is that you're keeping your eyes and your options open. You met members from both sides of the field and weren't impressed with the closed-mindedness. That's good, very good. I think, unless you've an objection, that I know just where to put you."

Not sure what the hat meant, Harry just figured that if the hat had an idea of where Harry belonged, he'd go along with the hat's ideas. The little bit of conversation the small boy had had with the Malfoy scion, and the youngest Weasley child left Harry a little disappointed in the attitudes of his peers. It didn't seem like things would be that much different from the school he'd attended before. He figured, though, that if the hat had actually been around for as long as it looked to have, it would know what it was doing by now, surely. So Harry mentally told the hat he didn't much care where it put him, he'd muster out as best he could wherever he landed, he'd always lived that way. With that the hat yelled out "SLYTHERIN," much to the amazement of the majority of the school. Puzzled at their confusion, Harry gently peeled the hat off his head and set it on the stool. Using what he'd already read, Harry wandered to the silver and green table, where they were politely clapping, but their faces seemed to hold a

vindictive glee. Harry almost shuddered, wondering what kind of tricks would be pulled on him for just breathing in this House.

He sat quietly next to the silver-haired Malfoy, as the blonde had scooted one of the larger two he'd wandered the train with to the side. As he sat, Harry apologized to the larger boy, thinking that his name might have been Goyle something or other. A slight nod of his head indicated the larger boy wasn't going to smack him around, and Harry relaxed a little as the Sorting continued. Trying to listen to the hat's calls and to the quiet murmur of the table at the same time, Harry was a little surprised as one of the older table members leaned forward to introduce himself.

"Name's Marcus Flint," a hand pushed its way into Harry's field of vision. As he met the gaze of the older student, Harry felt the urge to gulp. Was this where he shook the other boy's hand and got his hand crushed, or where the other would use the hold to yank him over the table and toss him onto the floor. Steeling himself for the worse, Harry nodded, and took the outstretched hand.

"Nice to meet you," Harry left off his name, figuring that even if they hadn't known him by name already, he'd only make a fuss by calling it out. The older boy nodded as well, and both retracted their hands.

"I'm the Slytherin Quidditch Captain, sixth year, and a Chaser to boot. You look like you'd be a good Seeker, and we need one for next year, when ours, Higgs over there," a jabbed finger pointed out a brunet boy quite a bit slimmer than Flint, but still a great deal bigger than Harry, "graduates. Right now, we're okay, but next year... Besides, you won't be able to have a broom of your own til then..."

"Oh," Harry had no clue what a Chaser or a Seeker was supposed to be, but he nodded all the same, "I suppose, if you teach me how, I could try."

Grinning the larger boy spent the next few minutes quietly introducing Harry to everyone else at the table. This coincided with Zabini, Blaise being Sorted into Slytherin, and the Headmaster's strange words of wisdom starting the meal. Amazed at the amount of food, Harry first wondered who would clean up the mess, and then if he would

actually be allowed to eat until he was full for once. The second question was answered as Harry noticed that food had found its way onto his plate, as opposed to off of, like usual. Not sure what to make of it, Harry mumbled a thank you under his breath, and ate some of the food. When he felt the urge to take a drink, he puzzled over the strange, orange liquid in the glass in front of him.

Apparently his caution with the food was noticed, and the "Keeper" Bletchley smirked, "S' just pumpkin juice, Potter. We're a paranoid lot, but the House Elves make and serve the food to the tables."

One of the other "Chasers," Pucey added his two cents worth, "Besides, with the rest of the school wishing they dared poison us, we have to band together. No, none of us fully trust each other, 'cause none of us know when someone else's ambition will surpass their need for assistance, but," here he shrugged.

"No one trusts a Slytherin," Flint grunted after finishing a mouthful of food, "So we all band together to defend ourselves against them. If you have a problem with someone from another house, speak up about it."

A boy with a badge on his chest, in the shape of a "P" spoke up, "We'll see to it that its dealt with."

Blinking, Harry looked at the badge. If it weren't for the colors, he'd swear it was the same as the one the oldest Weasley at Hogwarts wore. Deciding now was as good a time as any, he asked, "What exactly does the badge mean? I saw it on one of the Weasleys, and wondered if it was how he remembered his name, but-

Harry never did get his question answered, for the rest of the table burst into laughter. By the time it died down, Headmaster Dumbledore stood again at the table with the Professors. He cautioned everyone against wandering into the Forbidden Forest, with a rather pointed, but jolly look in the direction of the Gryffindors. He then brought up a corridor on the third floor as being "off-limits on pain of a gruesome death." As Harry wondered what that might be about, he peered at the long table, spotting the turban-wearing man he'd met at the Leaky Cauldron. He flinched as a searing pain shot

through his forehead, and one of the older Slytherins told him that if his head didn't stop hurting by the time they got to the Common Room, he could ask the Head of House for a headache remedy. Nodding vaguely, Harry wondered what a Head of House was, until the Headmaster dismissed all of the students.

With that, the table stood nearly as one, with the members of the House wearing badges leading. Harry began to suspect that the letter was in regards to an office or task set to the students, rather than a mnemonic device. When they reached the lowest level of the castle, Harry found himself fascinated by the mood of the place. It seemed dark, dank, dreary, and frightening, but as they approached a set of paintings seemingly in the middle of the place, the dungeons, as Harry heard older students refer to it, it felt warmer. The group stopped, and quietly, as though trying to maintain secrecy and privacy, the people at the front of the group spoke words to be spread around.

When the message got to Harry, he puzzled together that the passage to the Common Room was locked, and there was a password required for unlocking it. He didn't want to think about whom would have to stand guard, but he did his best to commit the password to memory. He didn't think that "Seguridad" was something he'd say in normal conversation at least, but he did wonder who came up with it.

"All right you lot," one of the badge wearing Slytherins spoke up, "I will say this once, and only once. Our password will change weekly, unless it gets around that someone's blabbed. Your best bet for learning the new one is to ask a Prefect personally. I don't want to hear any of you speaking the passwords outside the portrait guard. That means when you use it, say it low enough for the portrait to hear, and no louder. Follow me, and all First Years need to remain in the Common Room for an explanation of Slytherin expectations."

The girl turned around, and muttered to herself, Harry couldn't make out what she said, but apparently the password was in there, as a portion of the wall faded out of view, and the older students filtered through. The First Years held back a step, but decided to follow their elders through. Harry noted the lead girl's lack of volume in speaking

the password, and where she spoke it, and tried to think to himself how to remember both, as well as the strange word that would get him into the Common Room. Upon reaching the wall that had disappeared, Harry blinked, finding that it really had vanished from sight. He turned and watched the wall as the last of the Slytherins slipped into the room. The older students quickly vanished into either of two doorways, girls on one side, boys on the other. Finally, there were just the first years, and six older students, each with a badge on their chest, emblazoned with the letter "P."

"Now," the two oldest looking badge-bearers stood near the door and the female continued explaining, "You won't need a password to leave the Common Room, but I don't suggest you try leaving at all hours. While you might get away with wandering the Dungeon levels, any higher and you'll certainly be caught by either the Hogwarts Caretaker, Filch, our own Head of House, Potions Master Snape, or even the Gryffindor Head of House, Professor McGonagall."

"Don't go thinking that just because he's our Head of House and won't take points away as easily," the male added, "That getting caught out after curfew won't mean anything. Curfew happens to be nine o'clock in the evening for those under fourth year, ten for fourth and up, and only special circumstances will allow you to get around them. If a professor assigns you detention that late, you will be excused for curfew violation, so long as you are heading straight from your detention site to the Common Room. Said professor may assign a guard or guide to ensure this."

"Again," the female repeated what Harry heard at supper, "if someone in the other Houses is giving you a hard time, let us know. If a professor is being too harsh, let us know. At the least, we can get it turned in to our Head of House, and maybe something will be done about it. We don't trust anyone outside of our own House, most of the time, but sometimes we have to. In such situations, we must first present a united front. This means no backstabbing among Slytherins. It means do not get caught in your endeavors, and most of all, don't believe that something has to be wrong, just because it isn't right. The world isn't that simple, cut and dried, polarized, or that monochromatic."

"If there's something going on between you and another Slytherin," one of the younger girls with a badge spoke up, "Keep it in the Common Room. We have enough rumors floating around about our House, we don't need to add strife to that."

It seemed as though the badge-wearing students would continue, but the wall behind the oldest two disappeared again, and the man who'd been sitting beside Quirrell stepped through. He peered at all of the students in the room closely, then reached into a pouch he wore on his side. He removed a rather thick stack of papers that rolled at the ends- Harry thought they were called parchments. He divided the stack into seven piles and handed one each to the Prefects, as Harry thought he had heard them called. They nodded and walked through the doors the other students had already disappeared through.

"I am the Head of Slytherin House. I teach Potions, and will strive to pack your mulish brains with as much information as possible in the seven years you will attend this school," he began, "I do not want to hear of you fighting among yourselves. I do not want to hear of any of you being caught out after curfew. Nor do I want you to fight in the halls, in the classrooms, or anywhere on grounds. At the least, your punishments will be point loss, and detention."

Harry fidgeted a little.

"While in classes," the man continued, walking to the back of the room, where a small fireplace was filled with ashes and soot, unlit. He lit it with a flick of his wand, and the room brightened, and warmed just a little bit more, "You will not, under any circumstances fall behind. I want no one failing while I am Head of Slytherin. If you believe you will, or know you have fallen behind, I will find a student to teach you what you need to know to pass, at the minimum." With that, he began passing out sheets of paper, and informing each student what the paper meant to their lives.

"Potter," the man drawled, "You should stay back, I have more to say to you. The rest of you may go to the sleeping quarters, girls to the left, boys to the right. The closer your year is to zero, the lower down and further back your room is from the Common Room itself."

As he reached Harry, the majority of the other students had filed out. Luckily, the list hadn't been alphabetical, as this meant the Head of House's desire to talk to him wouldn't keep the rest of the students back in the Common Room. Harry took the list from the professor and read it quickly, trying to make sense of it. He noticed that the other students had all cleared out of the room at about the time that the older man sat in one of the chairs. He waved Harry into another, then leaned forward as the child settled.

"I want you to know, right off," he started, his voice somewhere between a hiss and a growl, "that I will not tolerate you following in your father's footsteps. That means no pranks on your classmates, and certainly no harassment of them. I will be watching you. If you break rules, I will not be lenient. I do not care that you are Harry Potter. To me you are another first year in my sphere of responsibility. Now, if that is clear, you may go to your quarters and sleep. You will be starting classes in the morning."

Harry stared after the man for a second, before standing and moving as quickly as he could to the door that led to the boys' rooms. He was puzzled to why the man would want to say those things this early in the year, when Harry hadn't even been there long enough to learn his way around yet. The best he could come up with was that his father must have had something to do with it, and Harry shrugged. He'd figure it out later, after he got some sleep.

I just need to know if there is more description needed, or if I'm gasping too descriptive. Comma check would be nice, but is not mandatory. My computer has a rudimentary grammar check, so any other fine-tuning in that department would be nice. As well as typos. Hate those. Lastly, is this a good start? Should I call all Weasleys 'Weasley' except Gred and Forge because of a lack of familiarity, or go with my instincts and call them by first name because there's so many?

I had this nice paragraph here that I realized would only get me into trouble. So anyone who wants to discuss the definition of abuse with me, check my profile, I should have an e-mail address there to send word through. Or noting it in a review would work.

Harry woke the next morning a little disoriented. He'd only just gotten used to the smallest bedroom at Privet Drive before school started. The idea of light shining in through windows was still alien to him, and he was further confused when he realized that the light was actually from torch sconces. He showered, dressed, and gathered books according to his schedule. It said he was to have double Transfiguration all morning, so he gathered the book assigned for the class, and the extra books he'd bought to help him better learn the concepts. He also packed the sheets of paper and pens he'd packed into his bag of books. He was still unfamiliar with the parchment and quills the supply list had requested, and would leave them for when he had a chance to practice using them. After all, he had enough trouble with pens bursting in his hands, he didn't want to add a quill into the equation any sooner than he had to.

When he finished packing his things, Harry wandered up the stairs to the Common Room, and asked one of the older students for directions to class. Somehow, he had the luck to have asked Higgs, the Quidditch Seeker, and the seventh year took the opportunity to not only show the boy a more efficient way to the Great Hall, but to also wax loquacious about the benefits of playing the broom-based sport. By the time they made it to the Great Hall, they'd not only gathered a small group of other Slytherins to chat with, but Harry also felt he actually understood the game.

"So, as Seeker," Harry tested his understanding, "You're supposed to keep an eye out for a tiny gold ball with wings? It flies about anywhere it pleases, and you have to not only spot it as it moves, but chase and catch it?"

Nodding, Higgs replied, "And dodge Bludgers, Quaffle, Keepers, Chasers and Beaters, not hit the goals, the announcer or members of the audience."

"Are you trying to scare me out of trying out next year?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

Laughing, the rest of the group teased the seventh year for intimidating the "ickle First Year," and Harry for being intimidated all at the same time. By this point, most of the students had settled into

the tables that were going to make it to breakfast at all. Something told Harry that the other Slytherins were holding something back in their conversations with him, but he couldn't place exactly what it was. He decided to ponder it later, as it was about time for him to go to class, and he asked for directions again. By the time the older students were done, Harry had drawn a rough map of the path to the Transfiguration classroom from both the Great Hall, and the Slytherin Common Room. He took this as a decent first step, as he could ask for directions to other rooms at and after lunch.

In class itself, Harry was amazed to see the lack of a Professor right up until the beginning of the period. He stared at the marmalade colored cat on McGonagall's desk, and wondered why the severe woman would have such a whimsical and uncontrollable pet. Just as they would be late, Ron, and the slightly heavyset boy from the night before rushed into the class.

"At least we got here before the professor," the redhead gasped as he found a seat in the back of the room.

Nearly the whole class gasped as the cat jumped off the desk and became Professor McGonagall herself. Harry tried not to laugh, as he'd heard some of the rude remarks both sides of the class had muttered. He could only imagine what the professor would have to say about them.

"Perhaps, Mr. Weasley," she hissed, "I should transfigure one of you into a clock, so that at least you'll be on time! Now, as for the rest of you," she turned and stalked back to the front of the classroom, "Open your books to page fifteen, and study the page."

Harry remembered the page, as it described the match to needle transfiguration procedure. It had marginally made sense when he read it before school started, and had only made a little more sense with the second reading during the train trip. He hoped Professor McGonagall would explain just how it was one could make a match become a sewing needle. To Harry's knowledge, a match was a thin block of wood with red paint and sulfur at the tip, while a sewing needle was made of silver, nickel, or steel, with an eye-hole at one

end and a sharp point at the other. He didn't see how they were anything alike, except in general shape.

"Now," she began, after giving them time to study the page, "Who among you can explain the differences between a matchstick and a needle?"

A few, hesitant hands rose in the air from the Slytherin side of the room, and several from the Gryffindor side, but one hand was almost thrown into the air with enough force to jar the body attached to it. From his encounter on the train with the girl, Harry was not surprised to see Hermione Granger attached to the so enthusiastically stretched hand.

"Miss Granger?"

"A match stick is made from wood, shaped into a slender rectangle, dipped in a flammable substance to create the tip, that includes sulfur. They are often painted red. A sewing needle is made of metal, nickel, silver, or steel, and is sharp at one end, and more blunted at the other. The blunter end is opened in the middle to create an eye, where the thread is pushed to sew with."

"Very good, Miss Granger," the older witch nodded, "Five points to Gryffindor. Now, who can tell me how matches and needles are alike? Mister Zabini?"

"They're both small, slender and have an oval shape at one end," the Slytherin boy drawled lazily.

"Good," with a nod, the professor walked back to her desk, waved her wand, and stood with her desk turned to a pig for a moment before waving her wand again to turn it back, "Turning a match into a needle is one of the basic steps of Transfiguration. One must, at all times, keep in mind both the similarities and the differences of the objects to be Transfigured. At no point will I allow tomfoolery in my class. As we get more and more complicated, it is quite possible to transfigure a living thing into an inanimate object. If done improperly, this can result in death. Therefore, if any of you horse around with these spells, I will have you removed from my class. At the very least."

Having impressed the students with the seriousness of the subject, she continued to explain the hows and mechanics of making a piece of wood become a sliver of metal. Harry took notes, including the mental comparison to the chemistry he'd heard older students talk about back in Surrey. After a while, Professor McGonagall told the class to put away their books, and they would begin transfiguring the matches.

"Remember the gesture, and the words," she stalked the room, quickly placing a match in front of each student, "Concentrate on how you want the needle to appear, and the material it is to be made of. Remember that a needle has an eyehole, as I will subtract points from your grade if it is missing. You will also lose points if I can still strike a fire as though it were a match."

The room was filled with muttering, and chanting, as each student practiced in their own way. By the time Harry felt comfortable with his gesture for the spell, Granger had yipped out her success in casting it. Praising her loudly, Professor McGonagall picked up the needle, showed it to the class and gave the Gryffindors five points for a successfully crafted needle. Harry shrugged and continued pronouncing the words for the spell, to be sure he'd have that right as well. Just as he was about to start actually casting, Malfoy completed the transfiguration, and announced it to the class. The professor walked to his desk, congratulated the boy and moved onto the next student, who needed coaching on pronouncing the words. Harry paused, then told himself that the points were for being the first to succeed.

He kept in mind the needles Aunt Petunia would let him use to mend the clothing Dudley wore out. Sometimes the clothing the Dursleys would give him would be so ragged, they needed mending before Harry even could wear them. They were simple steel, with a thin, but long eyehole, and were exceptionally sharp at the other end, but Harry was never allowed to use a thimble to protect his thumb, as Aunt Petunia figured he'd either lose it or would get it stuck on his thumb. He kept this picture in his head as he waved the wand in the movements he'd practiced, and chanted the words exactly as he'd heard Professor McGonagall and Malfoy pronounce them. To his

amazement, as he finished, there sat a simple needle and Harry couldn't resist picking it up and trying to strike it against the desk. It scraped the wood a little, but didn't light on fire.

"Ah," Harry jumped as he heard the words over his shoulder, "Mister Potter, you remembered to test your needle for flammability. Good thinking. Now, using the same words, and the same gesture, concentrate on the needle being a match again."

As there were few changes, Harry got right to work on the second half of the assignment, and just as his needle again became a match, both Granger and Malfoy exclaimed their success in returning their needles to matches. He felt the professor move from right behind him to check on the other two, and she congratulated all three students, giving a point apiece for completing the assignment so quickly. While the rest of the class struggled through the project, Professor McGonagall set Granger, Malfoy and Harry to changing the sizes of their needles, the eyeholes of the needles, and making them out of all of the various metals. By the end of the class, no one else had quite made a non-flammable needle that was completely silver in color with a notable eyehole. The others were assigned practicing the transfiguration, on top of the assignment all were responsible for. They were to write a ten-inch essay on transforming a needle into a fork.

The end of class signaled lunchtime, so Harry gathered his notes, piled them into his book, put the books, and pens into his bag, and took the match back up to the desk in the front of the room. From there, he walked with the other Slytherin students to the Great Hall. As he sat, Harry puzzled over the series of points the Gryffindor students gained in class, and the sheer lack of any gained for similar accomplishments from his Slytherin classmates.

"So why would Professor McGonagall award five points to a student for completing a transfiguration one way, but only award one point for completing both halves?" Harry asked this question aloud.

"I'll bet the first student was a Gryffindor," Flint muttered, "and the second was a Slytherin. McGonagall's as biased towards the

Gryffindors as Snape is to the Slytherins. Most would say they have a healthy rivalry, but it's not really that healthy."

"In fact," Bletchley added, "The main differences in their systems is that McGonagall will give more points to a Gryffindor than she'll give to a Slytherin, if she'll give us any. Snape just won't take points from our House."

"So why do they have such strong biases?" Harry felt compelled to ask.

"Guess which ones they were in when they were at this school," a fourth year hinted. At this point, the older students started looking each other in the eyes and nodding. Harry didn't quite know what this meant, but it seemed to be along the lines of what they weren't saying earlier, so he figured they'd made some kind of decision or agreement.

Harry finished eating quickly, so he could make a quick trip to the common room, for his books. He had Herbology and Charms in the afternoon, and wanted to pick up the books for those classes, as well as more paper. He'd tried to write smaller to use less space, but the notes for Transfiguration still took up a great deal of paper. By the time he'd gathered his books for class, it was time to start heading that way, so he pulled out his makeshift map, and asked an older student for directions to both classes from the Common Room, the Great Hall, and from each other. When he was finished drawing, Harry was pleased with the progress he'd made. He hoped to have a small map to help him get around quickly to his classes by the end of the week.

When Harry found the Herbology classroom, he wondered how they were going to take notes if the class took place in a greenhouse without any counter space not used by plants. As the rest of the class filtered in, Harry studied the plants. Some looked like ones he'd helped tend back at Privet Drive. He didn't want to get too close though, as the ones surrounding the almost familiar plants looked like they'd actually try to eat him. When Professor Sprout introduced herself, Harry relaxed a little. She was a lot more personable than McGonagall, and made it clear that most of the time, class would be

filled with practical work. She said that the majority of the notes they'd take for class would be taken while working on assignments.

She then introduced them to some of the smaller plants in the greenhouse. She kept the rowdier plants in line, sometimes tapping the leaves, others the stems. There was even a case of her actually picking up the whole pot of a plant and sternly talking to the bloom, as though it could understand her. Oddly enough, it reacted to her words just as though it did. Harry was amazed at the variety. Some of the plants, upon closer inspection, looked almost exactly like the ones in Aunt Petunia's garden, like the roses. Except these roses held their thorns in their stems until a person tried to touch, pick or prune them. That was when the rose would jut out its thorns, and rip them into one's flesh. Professor Sprout led the class back to the long tables in the center of the room and explained that the flowers on the table were their project for the class period. She spoke of how reactive the plants were, that positive emotions would cause them to grow one way, and negative ones, of course would influence them in another. As she set them to work, she told the class that the Wizard Whimsies, when in their reactive state, were nearly useless as anything other than decoration, and were often mistaken by Muggles as dandelions. If tended for by a generally happy witch or wizard, Whimsies would become very yellow, turn toward the sun and their caretaker, and would eventually seem to dance. When harvested, the sap contained in their stem was used in variations of cheering potions. However, if a depressed witch or wizard were in charge of Whimsies, they would turn grey, and would begin tipping their blooms to the ground, slumping horribly. Such Whimsies were used to provide the calming potions with a less expensive depressant ingredient, or in certain, less than legal drug cocktails.

"Now that we have that cleared up," Sprout smiled serenely, "We will be replanting these Whimsies and watering them. In the time it will take each of you to gently remove your Whimsy from the pot, we will know whether to have you replant it with the Mimsies, or the Whimsies. In any case, if you have trouble extracting your plant, I will be monitoring you, and you only need call out. I do not want any of you doing each other's work, but you can give hints and clues, those of you who get done quickly."

At this, Harry shrugged, and got to work. First off, he found a pair of gloves nearby and put them on. He'd replanted for Aunt Petunia's garden before, but those plants had come out of flimsy plastic planters, and he could cut those away with scissors. He thought of trying to transfigure the pot his plant was in to mimic that, but he figured he'd wait for something like that later. He stood there for a few seconds, gently petting the leaves and wondering what to do, then shrugged again. "Sorry if this hurts," he murmured as he gripped the plant by the stem as it reached into the soil, and pulled gently. He actually wanted to take the plant with the soil, so he wiggled it around a little, and with one more pull, out popped the Whimsy, soil and all. Harry reached for the larger pot nearby, and settled it in the very center. Patting it gently, he opened the container of extra soil provided at his station and used that to fill around the plant, cautiously breaking up some of the original soil to mix in, so that the old soil might get more nutrients from the new. When he finished, he stood there for a second in indecision. He couldn't see a difference in the plant, but then he wasn't an herbologist, right?

"Professor," Harry got Sprout's attention, "I think I'm done."

She quickly toddled over to his station, and peered at the plant, "Well, dear, you do have it replanted, with more soil added. You've been in contact with it plenty, but it's still not reacted with anything. You must have had some practice with gardening, then. A lot of gardening experienced children get this result. They slip into a mindset that is neither angry, nor sad, nor happy, and putter along. It's just fine, Mister Potter, a point to you for doing so well so quickly. I'll take the plant and you clean up. Then you can wander around and give advice to some of the others. Remember not to do their work for them."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry quickly swept the spilled soil up and put it back into the container it came from, then placed the old pot in the stack of pots of a like size. He pulled the gloves off of his hands and handed them to another student, who looked like their station had never had any, "These might help keep your hands clean."

The girl, a little blonde thing with a short nose, nodded, "Thank you," but didn't make a move to put the gloves on. Harry blinked for a second, thought of asking if she was going to replant the Whimsy with

the power of her mind, but kept to himself. He saw another boy a couple desks over trying to separate each slender root from the soil by carefully scraping the dirt into the larger pot, until a root was revealed.

"Why are you doing it like that?" Harry asked, "Moving that slow will take the whole period."

"Exactly," the boy turned and grinned, "I've heard that Professor Sprout will only continue or start a new lesson when all students have completed the previous part."

"Oh," Harry looked at the plant, which was certainly taking on a different appearance from the one he'd finished with, "Would you say that's Whimsy or Mimsy?"

The boy looked at his plant and grinned, "That's a Whimsy all right. Good, it's exactly what I wanted. Most of these are probably going to be Mimsies. Wanted to do something different."

Harry smiled quietly to himself and then spotted the two first years who could almost pass for second or third years, "How do you think they're going to do?"

The other boy spared them a glance, "Goyle? Eh, he might get finished, he's worked with plants before. But if Crabbe doesn't get done, Goyle won't, he doesn't want to leave his friend behind. Not for anything."

Harry wished to himself that he had friends, then turned and went back to his station, next to the blonde girl from before. She had neither picked up the gloves, nor made any other progress. Harry began to think she was expecting someone to come along and magic the assignment done for her. He shrugged and used the time as opportunity to write out some notes about Whimsies and Mimsies on one page, and notes about fellow students on another.

"That was Nott," the blonde girl spoke from over Harry's shoulder, and he jumped a bit.

"Huh?" Harry muttered intelligently.

"The boy who wants to take forever on the assignment," it looked like the girl was barely holding back a sneer, "His name is Theodore Nott. Mine is Pansy Parkinson, and I'm not touching the flower because I hate Whimsies, Mimsies, Flimsies, and Dimsies, and you can get any one of those from this plant. Won't touch them for anything, not even through a glove. Thank you for offering yours, but it won't change a thing."

"Ah," Harry added those bits of information to his notes, "Thank you. I'm still learning my way around the school and the people at the same time. I thought I'd take notes to keep them straight in my head."

"What is that thing you're writing with?" Pansy asked, the almost sneer exchanged for a semi-curious look.

"It's called a pen," Harry held it up for a bit, so she could get a closer look, "I used it at my old school. Haven't got the knack of quills, so," he shrugged, "Figured I'd leave those for when I was writing out assignments rather than notes."

The girl hmmed, then went back to glaring at the plant in front of her. Harry briefly thought about quickly repotting her plant just so it wouldn't die, but knowing his luck, he'd get caught. He then jumped as Professor Sprout piped up, "Miss Parkinson, I understand you have a strong aversion to Whimsies? Then you won't mind if Mister Potter gets a few points of extra credit for replanting yours, will you?"

The girl shrugged, and stepped back. Harry quickly put his notes and pen back in his bag, and put the gloves on again. He figured he would need extra credit anywhere he could get it. By the time he had repotted the second plant, it was time to go to the next class.

"Good job, Mister Potter," Sprout announced, "And you got the same results as last time. I may have some projects for you in your third year if you keep this mind set with gardening. Five points to Slytherin, and I'll see that you get that many extra credit points. That should be enough to keep a bad essay from failing you. Now, for your homework, all of you are to write a ten-inch scroll about the emotions

of a gardener, and how they affect various plants. You don't have to limit yourselves to Whimsies, but I am looking for at least one mention of them. Even if that mention is to the effect of, 'I hate Wizard's Whimsies.'"

Pansy giggled a little, and Harry smiled at the joke. All of the students gathered their things and headed out of the greenhouse. Harry quickly pulled his map out and started off for the Charms classroom. After a bit, he realized that the other Slytherins were following him closely.

"So, Potter," Malfoy matched him step for step, "You going to map out the whole school?"

"I'd thought of it," Harry looked at the map quickly, then turned left where it said to, "Of course, I'm following this, assuming I wasn't pranked. After all, I used it to get to the greenhouse, and it worked, so I'm going on trust here."

He could hear a couple of the others chuckle, as Malfoy nodded, "At least, this way, if you're late, the whole lot of us will be. And as it isn't a double class, the professor won't have to play favorites.

Feeling like he was being tested, Harry shrugged and read his map again, this time turning right, "So, all of the professors play that game, do they?"

As Malfoy answered, Harry got the feeling that his classmates had gotten the answer they were looking for, but he couldn't fathom whether he'd passed or failed the little test they had just given him, "Everyone judges Slytherins as lower than them, Potter, you should know that by now."

Harry would have answered, but they had reached the classroom his map said they were headed for. He shrugged, and chose a seat at the end of a row, but not too far from the front of the room. The others took seats as they pleased, and they all wondered where the professor was. A minute after the class should have started, and the students got restless, some muttering about a five-minute rule. Just then, a thunk resounded from behind the instructor's podium. Most of

the class jumped. When the second thunk sounded, Harry cautiously peered around the side of the podium, as it was within his view, and saw a tiny man, wrestling books into a column. He blinked. He blinked again, then asked, "Sir, do you need help with those books?"

Amidst looks that called him crazy, Harry got up from his desk and walked to the podium.

"Ah," the minuscule man looked up, "Thank you, Mister Potter, for offering. We'll take this as an opportunity to provide instruction for the first Charm you all will be learning."

The tiny man waved his wand then poked quickly towards the book, and called out, "Wingardium Leviosa!" and the book at his feet lifted into the air. He waggled his wand a bit, and the book followed its motions. He drew the wand towards the pile and set the book down on the stack, then chanted, "Finite Incantatum."

"See?" the professor met Harry's eyes, "Now you give it a try. Don't worry about getting it on the first try, I've been teaching first years all day, and only one girl has gotten it right on the first try so far. She was a Gryffindor girl who probably should have been in my House anyway. Well, go on, lad!"

Harry nodded nervously and remembered the words and the wand movement. He reviewed them carefully in his head. Just as some of the other students started jeering or chanting, he waved the wand, just as he'd seen Flitwick do, and chanted, "Wingardium Leviosa," poked the wand in the direction of the book, and just about fell over when it actually moved.

"Right," Professor Flitwick cheered him on, "Good job there, Mister Potter, a point to you. Try again, see if you can get more than just an inch of slide. I understand it's quite a bit heavier than what the rest of the class will be working with, but if you can levitate a book, a feather should be no challenge!"

Harry gaped at the professor for a second, then steeled himself to try again. The rest of the class was silent, they'd obviously also thought they'd be working with heavy books. He tried again, matching the

movement and the words to what he'd seen and done already. This time the book lifted an inch or so off of its neighbor, and then dropped again, with a thump.

"Good, good," tiny Flitwick was almost nodding himself off his own two feet, "Now, you may return to your desk, and I'll finish building my tower to see with. Then I will pass around the feathers, and the rest of you will try to get your feathers to float."

As the rest of the class muttered and chanted, Harry laughed to himself how like Transfiguration it sounded. Though there were fewer instances of students getting fed up and almost yelling the spell. When he tried to float the feather, Harry was unsurprised to see it not move even the slightest. He figured this morning with the match and a bit ago with the book were flukes.

"Ah," Flitwick quietly tapped Harry on the shoulder, trying not to make him jump, "your feather isn't cooperating? I think, Mister Potter, that you're having the same issue that the Gryffindors from earlier were having. The rest of the class made no progress whatsoever, one even set his feather on fire. This was after Miss Granger's success mind you, so I believe the problem stems from disbelief. You don't believe you can actually get this right, so your magic wants to prove you right. What you need to do, is concentrate on getting it right, because as I told the Gryffindors, this in-class assignment is worth a grade. I'm not going to waive the assignment because you almost moved a book," here the professor spoke to the entire class, "I fully intend to hold you Slytherins to the same standard I hold my Ravenclaws to. After all, I believe that your House is cousin to mine, just as the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors are cousins. Thus, each student who can not float a feather in the classroom will have to practice for next class, and will only receive half points next time if they manage it. I'm not doing this to be harsh, I made the same demands of the Ravens and the Huffles this morning, and the Gryffindors earlier this afternoon. Ask them if you want to prove it. I do want you all to be aware that I expect the best from each of you. If you find yourself unable to complete a task, talk to me, and I will do all I can to help. After all, I am here to help you. I would feel horrible if you came out of this class feeling as though I were an ogre, and not

just because I'm too tiny for the role. At the same time, I'm not a doormat, and will expect you all to learn."

After being prodded to try again, Harry chanted the words, with the same tone, inflection and pace as he had when working with the book. He waved and poked the wand the same way he'd been doing all class period, and was relieved to see the feather float off the desk, "It's not just because of an air draft, is it sir?"

Chuckling, Flitwick answered, "No, it's from your spell. You're young yet, but when you get further along, and especially if you excel in Charms and Transfiguration, you'll start to get a feel for the magic itself. Some of us older wizards, and yes, the witches too, start to have a sense for when magic is actively moving about them. It generally begins to be noticed at around fifth or sixth year. Now, Mister Potter, if you'll cast the charm again, this time, try to make the feather dance. I want it to do so in a controlled manner, mind you."

Harry paused. He didn't know any dances. He sighed, then cast the spell again. As the feather floated, he moved his wand gently from right to left, and was fascinated by the feather following the movement of the wand. He slowly dragged the wand from left to right, and the feather slowly swung to follow. He whipped the wand back and forth three times, and the feather zipped in the air. He hummed a children's poem he'd heard back in kindergarten, and waggled the wand to match. The feather followed.

"So, Potter," the voice over his shoulder snapped him out of the calm concentration he'd achieved with the feather, and he jumped. The feather went flying out into the middle of the classroom, landing on Flitwick's head.

"Ah, Mister Potter," the feather gently coasted back to Harry's desk, "I think you lost something."

Harry peered at the boy behind him. He wasn't sure if this was Crabbe or Goyle, as no one had actually introduced him to either as an individual yet. The boy took the opportunity to continue his statement from before, "Are you trying to be the Granger of Slytherin?"

Harry shook his head, "No, I'm trying to be me. I want to do well enough that the professors don't think I'd be better off sent back," blinking, Harry decided he'd said enough, "So, are you Crabbe, or Goyle?"

The other boy chuckled, "I'm Gregory Goyle. Now don't go letting on that I've actually got a brain, mind you. It's easier to let people think I don't."

"Okay," Harry wondered what was going on, "Aren't you afraid of them deciding that you're not smart enough to stay in the school and sending you away?"

"Nah," Goyle's eyes sparked with something Harry didn't understand, "The worst that would happen is my father would be asked to send me somewhere else, like Durmstrang."

"That's another school, is it?" Harry blinked.

"Yeah, it's one that actually teaches Dark Arts, not just Defense against it. Malfoy's mother and father argued about whether he'd come here or go there, but his mum finally won," the other boy mimed the wand movement, and Harry just had to point something out.

"You're poking towards the feather too soon," Harry winced, hoping not to be associated with the Gryffindor girl again.

"Really?" Goyle looked at the wand in question.

Nodding, Harry turned his chair completely around and showed Goyle the wand movement, "This is slower than you need to actually go, but it might help. You move it left to right, and then as you sound out the 'o' in 'Leviosa,' you poke towards the object."

The larger boy gave it a shot, just as Harry described, and both boys grinned as the feather lifted a full three inches off the table.

"Congratulations, Mister Goyle," Flitwick looked almost as though he wanted to Leviosa himself around the room, the glee he contained was so thick, "That's nearly everyone. We've just got Miss Bulstrode and Mister Crabbe left, and everyone will come out of class with full marks for the day." With that the tiny man ambled off to the other side of the classroom, where Millicent Bulstrode sat.

"So," the boy on the other side of Goyle piped up, "You wanna help me?"

Harry peered over at him. Sure enough, it was Crabbe, Goyle's not-quite twin. Harry couldn't tell why he'd come to associate the two as he did, they didn't look anything alike. Goyle was rounder in the face, and bulkier in the body. His hair was a mousy brown, and his eyes were almost dark enough to be mistaken for black. At the same time, Crabbe slumped, and his face was narrower. It still held the baby fat, but it came to a sharper point at the chin, and his eyes seemed a little bluer than Goyle's, but were still dark. His hair was nearly as black as Harry's. So while he couldn't puzzle out the why of it, Harry still thought of the two as twins.

"Let me see what you've got so far," Harry pointed at the feather, "I read all kinds of pointers in the textbook, and the other books I picked up, so I might be able to think of something."

Crabbe displayed his casting, and Harry could see that while he poked the wand at the right time, and moved the wand in the right direction, something seemed to be off in his pronouncing. Harry thought a bit, then asked, "You wouldn't happen to have a chipped tooth, would you?"

Blinking, Crabbe grinned, showing off the chip in one of his front teeth, "How'd you know?"

"The 's' sound you make," Harry enunciated, "Was just a little whistley. If you use a little less air to make that sound it should fix the whistle."

"He doesn't talk much," Goyle added, "Because of that."

Crabbe nodded, then started practicing his 's'es' in front of the other two. When the whistling stopped, Harry pointed at him, "There. Use that one."

Blinking, Crabbe repeated the sound a few times to learn it, and then tried the spell again, this time using his new sound for the 's' in 'Leviosa,' and all three boys gave a little cheer when the feather floated.

"Ah, good," Harry was beginning to wonder about Flitwick's ability to just pop up at a person's shoulder, "That's everyone in class, Mister Potter, thank you for helping your classmates, you're a credit to Slytherkind, and my Ravens could even take a few notes from you."

Harry ducked his head, blushing redder, he felt, than the Weasley's hair. If this is what helping people got him, he wasn't sure he liked it.

"Oh, don't worry," Flitwick tutted, "There will come spells that you'll have a hard time with. I can only hope that those you've helped will remember that and return the favor. Now, if all of you would please pack up, the class has ended. I want you to write me a ten-inch scroll on the charm you've learned in class today. You can cover its pronunciation, and how a variation of even a sibilant can affect it. You can even discuss how the movement of the wand will dictate the echo of the object being levitated."

With that, all of the children scrambled to gather their things and leave the room. Upon sitting down, Harry noticed a difference in the atmosphere at the table. Crabbe and Goyle had plunked themselves down next to Malfoy again, but this time, it seemed like no one was actually willing to sit near Harry. He figured it was about time. No one had ever lasted this long before, but Harry wasn't sure exactly what had made the others decide he wasn't worth their time. He finished eating, and the plate, glass, and silverware disappeared. He had enough space, so Harry pulled out his Transfiguration book and began taking notes for writing the essay due next class period. At about the time he'd started working on the notes for the third essay of the day, he'd copy them onto actual parchment later that night, Flint flopped down onto the bench, and Harry looked up.

This was where he realized that it wasn't just Flint who'd flopped. It was more or less the entire Quidditch team, and Harry began shivering internally. This started to feel like the times when Dudley's gang circled around him. Then he remembered the Prefects and the Head of House mentioning repeatedly that they were to keep Slytherin issues in Slytherin, and hoped that meant he wasn't going to be pounded into the table.

"So," Flint began, "You've been asking all kinds of questions all day. Got any more?"

Harry felt he was being tested again, but he figured that if this world was different from the Dursleys, maybe the 'no questions' rule was too, so he asked, even though it felt like he was failing another test, "Are Professors Sprout and Flitwick always like that? They seemed really nice in class, but I wanted to know if they were just that way when it's just Slytherins in class. Will they be that nice when the classes are Doubles?"

Flint nodded, and some of the tension seeped out of the rest of the Quidditch team, "Yeah, they're always that impartial. The rivalry between Slytherin and Gryffindor really just rules our two houses. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw stay out of it for the most part. There are professors though, that will blame everything on a Slytherin, even if they see a Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, or Hufflepuff commit it."

"So why don't you already know this stuff," Higgs rolled his eyes, "Every pureblood child is raised knowing the politics of Hogwarts if there's even a chance of them going."

Harry blinked, and realized which test he'd failed, "I don't," he paused, "I was raised by Muggles. I don't know anything about the wizarding world, because my Aunt and Uncle never told me anything."

He'd expected it, but that didn't keep it from smarting when the rest of the table went silent, and then started talking again. He could feel the distance develop. Even though the Quidditch team still sat around him, Harry might as well have had three seats cleared around him on all sides. He packed away his books, and stood. Climbing away from the bench, he walked out of the Great Hall, and used his map to find

his way back to the Common Room. From there, he pulled his notes and rough drafts out, and the quills and parchment, and set to writing the essays on 'good' paper.

He'd just finished the last line of his Charms assignment when other Slytherins started filtering in to the Common Room. He packed up his things and stored them in his trunk. He hoped with all his strength that no one would try to rip his assignments apart, but wasn't holding his breath. Thus, he'd written two copies, and was fully intending to take one set to the Head of their House for safekeeping. He needed to talk to the Head of House anyway, so he might as well kill two birds with one stone, right?

He knocked on the portrait that Professor Snape had indicated led to his office, and waited. After a bit, where Harry stood still, being stared at by the other Slytherins, the door opened, and Professor Snape peered at him. Harry wasn't sure if the man was looking at him like he was an ant for interrupting his work, or for just existing, but he didn't figure he had much choice but to talk to the man.

"All right, Potter," Snape nodded slightly and led the boy to the office. He waved Harry into a chair and sat behind the desk, "I suppose this has to do with classes today. Didn't the professors toady enough?"

"Sir?" Harry was honestly puzzled, "I was just asking if there were something wrong with Muggles. I've been asking the other Slytherins questions about the professors all day. Like Professor McGonagall gave Granger five points for transfiguring a match into a needle, and when Malfoy accomplished the same task, not five minutes later, she only congratulated him. So I asked at lunch, and was told that was normal. Then during Herbology and Charms, the two professors were a lot warmer, and so I asked at supper about them. Then I was asked why I asked so many questions, and told them I was raised by Muggles. From then on, no one's said a word to me. I feel like they were testing me for something and I failed. What did I do sir?"

"Ah," the dark and dour looking man muttered, "The whole problem stems all the way back to the founders of the school. You see, there is a theory that the more pure your blood is in relation to being a wizard, the more powerful your magic will be. This theory has been

weeded and pruned to the point that the majority of the children in Slytherin have been raised to believe they should only associate with other pureblood children. Anyone else is simply inferior. I'm really surprised you don't know this already Potter, your relatives should have already told you who you should associate with. I'm still trying to fathom how you wound up in this House, of all places."

"Sorry sir," Harry stared at one of the jars on a shelf to his right. It looked like eyes of some kind, pickled, "My Aunt and Uncle don't like magic. I'd even be willing to say they hate it. They don't much like me either, it seems, and so they told me nothing of the Wizarding world until Hagrid came to deliver my school letter."

"Hagrid," Snape paused, and said each word slowly, as if trying to believe them, "delivered your school letter? Why, pray tell, would such a service be granted to you?"

"Uhm," Harry was so nervous now he just stared at his own knees, "Because the rest of them were ripped apart, burned, or simply thrown away by my relatives. They didn't like me, but I get the feeling they didn't want me going to Hogwarts either."

"Hm," Snape steepled his fingers below his nose, "this is interesting to learn. Why exactly did you want to bring this to me?"

"You said to keep the issues of Slytherin in Slytherin," Harry finally looked up, "Plus, now that the others in the House seem to be deciding to, er, snub me, I figured I needed to make a second copy of my assignments, so that if the ones in my trunk somehow disappear, I'd have a copy still to turn in. Do you mind keeping these for me?" Harry gingerly held out the three ten-inch scrolls. He was relieved slightly to see the Professor take them. The silence stretched as the man read them.

"Well, Potter," he looked up and Harry tried not to wince at the darkness in the eyes, "I can hold on to them for you. I would suggest however, that you learn a different way to make sure your belongings stay safe. If your Housemates do take to systematically destroying your things, you can report this to me. I will do something about it."

"Thank you sir," Harry stood quickly and not sure if he should bow or not, at least dipped his head, "For listening, and for your help. I'll definitely look up a way to keep my trunk locked. Are there charms for preventing papers from being ripped or marked up?"

"Yes," the man actually seemed amused now, "There are, but I would suggest not preventing marking, as your Professors will want to correct your work."

"Oh," Harry bit his lip, "but if I can find one to prevent the marking and such, shouldn't there be a spell to remove the first?"

Harry didn't know whether to be scared or not, the man actually seemed to be grinning. Well, at least in comparison. The edges of his mouth had just barely moved, but he didn't seem to be glaring as badly as when he'd led Harry into the room, "In most instances, the spell 'Finite Incantatum,' will end the effects of a previous spell. Just be aware that if your possible saboteurs realize you're spelling your belongings, they may try that spell for that reason. So do look up alternatives as well."

"Thank you sir," Harry repeated himself, and scuttled back into the Common Room. There he noticed several other students working on assignments. Some looked up, but no one spoke to him. He was glad actually, that they had chosen to ignore him. It was better than being constantly pummeled. He almost wanted to ask one of the older students if this meant he'd have to go to a Ravenclaw for help with assignments, but decided it was safer to head down straight to his sleeping quarters to see if he could find a spell to protect his things with.

He'd noted a couple of possibilities, and that they both were ended by 'Finite Incantatum,' when he heard the rest of his yearmates trudging down to the room. Harry quickly spread the rest of his notes around to make it look like he was working on the assignments for the day still.

"So Potter," Nott leaned on one of the posts on Harry's bed, "How is it you're so ignorant of Pureblood supremacy?"

Sighing, Harry started packing away his things. The other boys were also preparing to go to bed. He pondered over using one of the spells, but decided to wait until later, "I was raised by Muggles. Muggles who hate magic. So I wasn't aware of magic except as 'tomfoolery, rubbish, and lazy fools getting up to no good' until Hagrid delivered my letter. He had to because all of the rest were destroyed one way or another by my relatives. They can't stand me, so I don't quite know why they'd want to keep me from coming to Hogwarts. But they did."

"See, Potter," Malfoy sauntered up to the post opposite where Nott had started the conversation from, "That's why wizards are better than Muggles. They fear us just because we're different, and even hate us for it. They're really nothing but fools themselves."

Smirking, Harry looked Malfoy in the eyes, "Do you know how many times I've heard Muggles use the same line of thought when declaring one skin tone or religion better than another? If they think that a pale skin tone is better just because it is what they know, how is a wizard any different for thinking he's better than a Muggle just because they are different?"

Harry felt he'd said it the right way when Malfoy paused to think. The rest of the boys were looking at Harry as though he had unexpectedly given them a test of some kind. Malfoy shrugged, and headed for his own bed, "I'll get back to you on that one, Potter."

With that, the only sounds heard were the rustling of the bedcovers as each boy climbed into his bed and rolled over to go to sleep.

I just need to know if there is more description needed, or if I'm gasp too descriptive. Comma check would be nice, but is not mandatory. My computer has a rudimentary grammar check, so any other fine-tuning in that department would be nice. As well as typos. Hate those. Lastly, is this a good start?

Please forgive any ignorance in the sciences that I display. I'm trying to remember the things I learned, but it's been at least three years since I had a science class, and I don't remember where I heard the parts about matches from.

aimer: Though I hope to have characters of my own to write about someday, this is NOT that day. So if you don't want to read of my writing about other people's characters, there's a back button somewhere on the screen. Use it.

This is AU in that Harry meets the twins in London, rather than his first Weasley meeting being Ron on the train. Since I've only plotted out through the first book's worth of story line, I'm not sure HOW AU it will get yet.

The next morning, Harry quickly got ready for morning classes, and headed to the Great Hall for breakfast. He wondered if he would get directions from the older Slytherins today, or if they would outright refuse to speak with him. He decided to chance it, and stood next to Flint first off. "My next class is Flying, and I need to know how to get there."

"You're putting together a whole map, aren't you, Potter?" Flint met Harry's eyes.

Harry nodded, "I rather doubt you get lost after five years here, but if I get enough input, I might be able to make a comprehensive map, for all Slytherins to use."

Flint grinned, "Now you're making it worth my while," he turned and poked the rest of the Quidditch teammates at the table, "Potter here's working on a map. We'll start him off with the classes he needs, but then we'll give him directions to other places, for the rest of us, yeah?"

With the nodding heads, Harry relaxed a touch. Space was made for him at the table, and he pulled out his makeshift map. While working on the map and eating his meal, Harry thought to himself about the behavior of his housemates. He figured that as long as he could find things to barter with, he could get help from any of them. Then he wondered if that had been what they were looking for in the first place. Shrugging mentally, Harry decided that as long as they didn't destroy his things, he didn't much care. But that didn't mean he wasn't going to research protections for his assignments. By the time breakfast was over, he'd gotten directions for the Quidditch pitch, where the Flying class would take place, and for History and Potions. He also got directions that would let him move straight from one classroom to another, in all class cases. He thanked the older students, and found himself being the point man for the rest of the first years of his House, as he walked to class. By the time they reached the doors leading to the pitch, the Gryffindors had joined the chain of students following Harry, and for his own thoughts, Harry found it funny.

As the last of the students set their belongings on the ground, and waited for the professor, Harry studied the field. He recognized the

three hoops on either side that the Slytherin team had mentioned, and thought to himself that the height was rather astounding. He had thought he understood that the game was played in the air, but he discovered that he'd underestimated just how in the air it really was.

"Ah good," a slender, tall witch stalked out, her pace somewhat matching Professor McGonagall's. Her hair was much shorter though, and silver in such a way that it didn't make her look old. As she brushed past him, Harry thought her eyes were actually the same tawny color of Hedwig's eyes, and they even seemed to be slitted like a cat's, "None of you are late. That's good. Now, I want to make sure all of you are prepared for this. I will teach all of you how to fly on brooms. It doesn't matter if your parents have already taught you, I'm teaching you my way. I want all of you to remove your over robes, and any loose jewelry and change from your pockets and persons. When you take to the air, you could find yourself jostled quite a bit, and anything flying from your pockets will be a liability. While you do this, I will collect the brooms and place them on the grass. When you're ready, approach a broom and stand with it to your left. We'll proceed when all of you have placed yourselves with a broom.

She charged off to the broom shed, and Harry watched her for a few seconds. His attention was drawn to the discussion that some of the Gryffindor children were carrying about a small sphere. It seemed Longbottom's grandmother had sent him something called a 'rememberall' and he was explaining that it filled with red smoke when something was forgotten. The Slytherins promptly laughed as it filled with red smoke.

"Pity it doesn't tell you what you forgot," Malfoy smirked, "then it might actually be a useful gift."

Harry shook his head, and approached a broom. He blinked a bit when Goyle stalked after him and took the broom to his right. Malfoy, at a more sedate pace, took the broom to Goyle's right, and Crabbe just to the right of Malfoy. When all students had placed themselves, Hooch began lecturing again, "These brooms are charmed to react to commands. To start, you will have to issue verbal commands, but as you get more familiar with them, you won't even need words. This lesson is meant to teach you how to command a broom from the

complete rest position. They are on the ground, and you will reach out your left hand, leaving it to hover over the broom. You will then look at it, and say, 'up,' and it should rise up from the ground to your hand. Am I understood?"

As she got the desired response, she waved her hand for the class to begin. The air filled with repetitions of the command indicated, and Harry blinked. He looked at his broom, held out his left hand over the shaft, and called out, "Up," and was jostled a bit by the force with which the broom flew from the ground to meet his hand. The silence around him made Harry blink some more, "You mean it isn't always this easy to call your broom?"

Chuckling, Madame Hooch shook her head, "Perhaps if the broom truly belongs to the person calling it, but these are school-issued brooms, Mister Potter. A point to Slytherin for such a quick response from a broom. You may drop it and try again, if you wish."

Shrugging, Harry did just that. Three, four, five times, he dropped the broom, held a hand over it, and called for it to rise into his hand. It responded to the beckons promptly each time. At this point, most of the rest of the class had gotten their brooms to respond at least once, though Longbottom, Parkinson, and Granger had yet to wrap their hands about their brooms.

"All right then," Hooch called a stop to the broom-calling, "Now you will hold your broom in both hands and swing, gently mind you, you don't want to kick your neighbor, your left leg over the broom stick, and you will seat yourself. When you have accomplished that, you will lean slightly forward, and concentrate on the broom's upward movement. You will ride the broom three feet into the air, coast for a few seconds, and then you will sink back to the ground. Is this clear?" She nodded and the class proceeded to mount the brooms. Harry dodged Goyle's foot, and was glad he'd chosen the end of a column, so he didn't have to worry about someone dodging his. When everyone had straddled their brooms, Hooch called out, "All right, on the count of three you will kick off, One, Two-"

At this point everyone's attention was drawn to Longbottom, who had anticipated difficulty in kicking off in time with everyone else, and had

thusly kicked off too soon. Sadly, he had also kicked off too hard, and found himself flying. He was much, much higher than three feet in the air as he whimpered nervously. By the time Hooch reached where his broom had started, Longbottom's shifting weight had caused the broom to swerve and weave as well as continue to lift. Hooch reached up for the stems at the end of the broom, but couldn't quite reach them. The entire class watched in shock as the broom lifted Longbottom higher and higher, and finally began flying in circles. Harry saw the direction it was headed and winced just before the broom, and boy both collided with a torch setting on one of the walls. The crack itself was a painful sound, and told most everyone there that something had broken. At this point, Harry figured it was just the broom, but he could see that Longbottom had gotten caught on the metal that held the torch in place, and his shirt was ripping through. Hooch, and much of the class rushed to the boy's location, but still didn't make it in time to keep him from falling the ten or so feet, and landing with another crack. The meaty sound of this one told Harry that at the least, Longbottom had broken an arm.

"Poor dear," Hooch cooed as one would over an injured wild animal as she helped the injured child stand, "It's broken. We'll just take you to Madame Pomfrey and get that fixed. The rest of you are to remain as you are, and will stay on the ground. If I return and even one of you has touched off ground, even a foot, I will see to it you are expelled. Is that clear?" She didn't even wait for a response as she led Longbottom off, cradling his arm gently in her hands.

Malfoy, at this point, spotted something on the ground not far from where Longbottom had stood at the start of the lesson. He picked it up and smirked, "Bet the lump wishes he'd been looking at this right before he took off, he might not have forgotten he was supposed to wait for her to say three."

"Malfoy," Ron growled, "Let go of that, you have no right to it!"

"Surely no more than you," Malfoy smirked and mimed throwing it, "Why don't you go and catch it?"

Just as the blonde would have tossed it, Harry snatched it from his grasp, "Forget it Malfoy, if you toss it, it will break, and we might be

held responsible for it. Besides, it's not worth it to play such a prank. They already think the worst of Slytherin, why make it worse on ourselves?" Harry shrugged and tossed the ball to Granger, and noticed that it stayed completely clear.

After Madame Hooch returned, the class finished with the lesson. Harry could tell that Granger was quite happy to keep both feet firmly planted, and it seemed as though one of the other Gryffindor girls agreed with her, as did Parkinson, though none of the three would admit it. At the end of the class, everyone gathered their things, and Harry noticed that Weasley had picked up Longbottom's things as well. Unintentionally, Harry led the rest of Slytherin from the pitch to the classroom used for History of Magic.

Upon sitting, Harry realized what made this class so different. The professor was not only already there, but he was dead. Or rather, he was a ghost. This left Harry wondering if the History class would bore him to death, literally, as it seemed almost certain that the professor had met with such a fate.

Harry took notes as diligently as possible for at least the first half-hour of class. As much as he tried, though, Harry found himself nodding off. The droning voice that never paused, never hiccupped, and never rose just put him right to sleep. His only comfort as he woke at the end of class was that Harry was most definitely not the only student to fall asleep. He gathered his things, and walked to the Great Hall for lunch. When he found a place to sit, he quietly asked older Slytherins if they had a problem with falling asleep in History. Unanimously, he was informed that one in thirty students was actually capable of staying awake in that class. This left Harry vowing to find a way to be one of them. He figured that at the least, he could work on his assignments, or take notes direct from the book. What little he'd already managed seemed to be more or less word for word from the book, so Harry figured he'd be safe that way.

"So you're going to work ahead in History, are you," Nott's comment made Harry realize he'd been muttering aloud. His nod earned him a smirk, "Want a study buddy?"

Raising an eyebrow, Harry wondered why he was suddenly not being ignored. He voiced this question, and just barely noticed in his peripheral vision that he had gotten the attention of most of the table.

"You see," Nott started, "I don't much like following behind you to class, like a duckling behind its mum. I want one of those maps. I figure that if I can come up with something to trade for the map, we will come out even."

"Studying with me won't make us 'come out even,' I hope you realize," Harry countered, "because that will benefit you as much as it will me."

Nodding, the other first year grinned, "Sure it will, but in the meantime, it will give us a chance to find out where you do need help. I mean, you can't be good at all the classes, can you, Potter? So far it doesn't look like you'll need help in Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology or Flying. Maybe you'll find yourself lacking in Potions, or Defense, in which case, I will stand a good chance of being able to help."

Harry snorted, "If you're so determined to find something to pay for the map with, why don't you help me understand more of the unwritten rules you know, having been raised a Wizard, that I wouldn't know?"

At this point, Harry got the funny feeling that the older students were all smirking. While he was sure it was at him, he didn't think they were laughing. It seemed more like they were proud of something. This feeling was quickly overcome by the rest of the first years offering to help with this understanding in exchange for a map as well. For the first time, Harry felt like he was needed for something he could actually help people with. The whole 'Boy-Who-Lived' business seemed too much of a stretch to him, but helping fellow students find their way around the school, that was something he had control over. Not to mention the apparent study group that was formed. He wouldn't quite call any of the others his friend, at this point, but it was certainly closer than he'd ever been before.

Shaking off the almost warm and squishy feeling, Harry stood to go to the last class of the day. He was disconcerted by the almost

unanimous movement of the rest of the first years, to match him. He muttered about how he needed to get that map completed and copied quickly, or he'd go mad with the parade. Chuckles from the older students met his ears, and told him they'd heard.

As he walked, he wondered why this class was given a time slot to match Transfiguration's, when the Flying class, which had also been with Gryffindors, had not. Then he wondered how long they would be in the Flying class at all. Somewhere just before the dungeons, low chuckles from the other Slytherins told Harry that the parade had been increased to include the Gryffindors. Some of the pluckier members of the red-and-gold brigade tried to push their way to the front, or to take a different path entirely, to try and make it to class first. This caused bickering within the ranks as it were, and Harry slowed enough to comfortably turn and look. Crabbe and Goyle were standing, towering really, over Ron, and two other Gryffindors, a dark-skinned boy, and a brunet who, while pale, wasn't nearly as pale as Malfoy, or even the youngest Weasley boy. The Gryffindor boys were arguing about how they didn't need to follow 'slythering' Slytherins, and could make their way just fine. Malfoy countered with a remark that incited more anger, and Harry stepped towards the sextet quickly. The whole cluster of students halted. The Slytherins because they wanted to see how this would end, and the Gryffindors because they'd just entered the dungeons, and didn't like the atmosphere.

"If you three are so sure you know where you're going," Harry cocked his head sideways as he reached the group of arguing boys, "Why are you so deep in the middle of this miniature parade? I certainly don't mind if you wander off on your own."

Ron blinked, "Look, Potter, you lot of Slytherins are blocking the way, so of course we can't help but be in the thick of you."

Shrugging, Harry looked at the rest of the Slytherins in the hall. They all smirked, and then moved to the sides of the walls. Harry looked back to the redhead, "There you go. Path's clear. You can certainly feel free to continue on your own." The Gryffindor boys dashed down the hall. Many of the rest of the Gryffindors went with them, leaving behind Granger, and Longbottom, both of whom seemed nervous.

Harry met Malfoy's eyes, "Potter, why are you being so..." Malfoy seemed at a loss for words.

"I don't care how you feel about the Gryffindors, personally," Harry turned and started back down the hall, reading his map, "But I do care about how the rest of the school sees us. They certainly aren't going to think any higher of us if we just meet their expectations. But if we prove better than they think we are, what does that say?"

The now smaller parade continued to follow Harry down the hall. He was rather amazed when they didn't encounter the Gryffindors again. At the door to the classroom, Harry turned again, rather amazed to see Longbottom and Granger still in the midst of the snakes. He smiled quietly at them, and received tremulous smiles in return, "Here we are. Wonder if the rest of the Gryffindors made it already?"

This made the Slytherins realize they had folded around the two stray Gryffindors, almost as if to protect them, and every one of them winced, turned colors, or huffed. Harry grinned, then turned back to the door and pushed it open. The students poured in, and Harry noticed that it had been empty before the cluster reached the room. He settled in a desk near the middle, with Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle to the left of him, and Longbottom and Granger to his right.

As the class was about to begin, the rest of the Gryffindors rushed in, flustered and breathless. They seated themselves quickly and whispered amongst themselves. The general consensus seemed to be that they would rather not follow the directionally challenged redhead again.

The doors flew open again, and a tall man in dark robes stalked to the front of the room, with the robes themselves swooping behind him in a manner that reminded Harry of the one horror movie Dudley had been allowed to see. The bad guy's cloak had fluttered like that, and Harry had thought it interesting. He wondered to himself what kind of practice he'd have to carry out to pull that off for himself.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion making," the man began after glaring the class down to silence. Harry had already set out his paper and pens, and began scratching down

notes, "As there is little foolish wand-waving in here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death- if you aren't as bit a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach." At this point, Harry was scrambling to note all of this down as he'd done in the other classes he'd already had. The silence in the room drew his attention back up to the professor, whose pitch-black eyes were boring into the top of Harry's head.

Harry blinked as the professor started again, "Mister Potter, what would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Something told Harry he should know this. He remembered reading about both herbs in passing in his Herbology text. He took a few seconds to think, and his mind told him it had something to do with living death, but that made no sense as the two words were oxymorons. Shrugging internally, Harry gave it a shot anyway, "I'm not sure exactly, but doesn't it have to do with living death, sir?"

The man blinked, and then asked another question, "Where would I find a bezoar?"

Harry was shocked to remember this one, but the path to remembering was convoluted. He remembered a science class discussion mentioning that stones from a goat's stomach were remarkably good at removing toxins, and he remembered reading somewhere that such stones were called bezoars, "You'd have to dig one out of the stomach of a goat, wouldn't you sir?"

Another blink, and another question, "What's the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

Harry wondered what he'd done to get pummeled with all of these questions, especially as Granger was nearly beaming Longbottom with her hand in the air as she frantically tried to get the professor's attention to try answering the questions. Puzzling to himself, Harry

honestly couldn't remember reading about either in his texts, though he thought he'd heard of wolfsbane before. He just couldn't remember what it was. This time, he physically shrugged, and tried to smart-aleck his way out, "Their names, sir?"

Some strange glimmer in the man's eye told Harry that he was both amused, and very much not amused. This made the boy wince internally, as he quickly jotted the three questions down on paper, as the man answered the three questions he'd posed. Harry was amazed to have gotten close on the first, and to have gotten the second right. But he was utterly shocked when the professor answered the third question.

"Monkshood and Wolfsbane are alternate names for the herb also called aconite," here Harry felt like the man was smirking at the class for a second, just before he barked out, "Why aren't you taking notes?"

Harry shook his head as he faced his paper. He took notes from the lecture as diligently as possible, still a little put out at not getting all the words from the earliest part of it. He'd gotten the part about 'wand waving,' and 'bottling fame,' not that he'd want to, but he hadn't been able to catch the part right after 'bottling fame.' Throughout the rest of the class, Harry scribbled his notes quick as he could, this man spoke quietly, but he sure could pack a lot of words into one breath.

"Now that you've had sufficient background, we will begin," the blackboard behind Professor Snape suddenly was covered in words, and Harry blinked for a second before scribbling the information onto a clean sheet of paper quick as he could. Meanwhile, the professor was explaining that they would break into pairs and would brew this potion in class. Harry boggled, not feeling that he'd had enough background at all. Sure, he'd read the books on herbs, and ingredients, and even tried to fathom what they meant with the instructions, but Harry didn't feel ready to actually brew.

Sighing as he was set to work with Crabbe, Harry looked at the other boy and asked quietly which of them should gather the ingredients. When they decided that Crabbe would fetch and carry, Harry pulled out his supplies, the cauldron, the blades and mortar and pestle. It

seemed that there was need for all three. He was rereading the instructions and setting to lighting the fire under the cauldron when Crabbe returned.

"It says here to let the cauldron heat up to start," Harry pointed, and the other boy nodded, "Then we're supposed to chop the slugs into half-inch squares, leaving the extra bits to the side. I suppose we can put the water in to start, to let it simmer."

Harry looked up, and realized that Crabbe was just looking at him, "The instructions don't say anything about water, Potter."

"How else are the slugs supposed to stew?" Harry blinked, honestly puzzled.

"Dunno," the taller boy responded.

Just then, the professor passed by and Harry spoke up, "Sir, we were wondering how we're supposed to stew the slugs, if water's not on the list of ingredients?"

"I hope, Mister Potter, that you and your partner," Snape sneered, "didn't simply pour out the fluid your slugs came in."

Harry thanked the man and gently poured the liquid the slugs had been stored within in to the cauldron. It hissed a little, and sizzled some more, but Harry was already chopping the slugs, having asked Crabbe to crush the snake fangs.

Harry and Crabbe had gotten to the stage of adding the porcupine quills, and Harry wondered where to put the cauldron so it didn't set anything on fire, when Crabbe solved the problem by moving the fire instead. Harry grinned at the other boy and waited a few seconds for the potion to turn green, as the instructions said. He double-checked the words, and muttered, "How are you supposed to tell pea green from grass green?"

Chuckling, Crabbe piped up, "Don't worry, Potter, I'll tell you when it's the right color," and just then, he reached over and tipped Harry's hand over, so that the measured quills fell into the cauldron, "There."

Rolling his eyes, Harry read the next line of instructions, "We're supposed to wait for it to turn slate, then put the fire back under it. Guess that's your cue again, huh?"

While they waited, Harry watched the rest of the class. It seemed as though Granger, who'd moved to the other side of the room, was nearly done with her potion, the 'assistance' from Parkinson notwithstanding. Harry heard Crabbe replace the fire under the cauldron, and the other boy added, "Guess I'll have to teach you to understand the shades of color, in exchange for a map, then, Potter."

Smirking, Harry read the next line, "Now we stir-

An explosion in the front of the classroom interrupted Harry. It appeared that Longbottom, after having been moved to the very front, had blown a rather large dent into the cauldron in front of him, and Harry briefly wondered how that had happened. Blinking, Harry finished reading the line in front of him, and added the nettles when the potion released a smoky blue gas. He heard Snape order the slightly heavyset boy to the Infirmary, and Harry wondered if the Longbottom was going to set a record for most frequent visitor.

"The poor snot's covered in boils," Crabbe muttered.

"I've heard of things being their own antidote, but that's just ridiculous," Harry muttered, "Well, according to the instructions, we're just supposed to wait for it to turn candy apple red, and then it's done."

Harry felt bad for not worrying more over the other boy's accident in Potions, but he didn't read Professor Snape as the type to let them off from finishing the assignment just because of another student getting injured. When he and Crabbe finished putting the red-colored potion into vials, Harry took them up to the front of the room. The man nodded as Harry set the labeled vials next to the ones Granger and Parkinson, and Malfoy and Goyle had already turned in. He then

snapped at the rest of the class, demanding that they continue working on their Potions instead of gawking.

Returning to his station, Harry set about cleaning the cauldron. Following the instructions from the book, indicating that it was unsafe to clean cauldrons with magic, Harry had gathered a towel devoted to the task and wiped down the cauldron with it. When he had finished, he noted that his partner had taken the opportunity to clean the knives, mortar and pestle, and had set them back on the table, so Harry could put them back in his supply bag. He thanked the other boy and stowed them away. At this point, the class was released, with the task of writing a ten-inch essay on the general effects of porcupine quills in potions, and how their preparation would affect the reactions.

As the rest of the class filtered out, Harry waited to speak with the professor. The man looked up from the desks after the last student had left, "Yes, Potter?"

"Sir," Harry hesitated, "I was trying to take notes at the beginning of class, but couldn't keep up. I got as far as your comments on wand-waving, then lost some of what you said. I caught up with you at brewing fame, and lost you again. Do you think you could repeat it so I can take the notes? I don't want to not have them to study from for a quiz. Er, will we be quizzed on it?"

For the first time, Harry saw the man full-out smirk, "Potter, you'll just have to get notes from the rest of your classmates. And you never know what I will quiz you on, until you see it. Go on, you have assignments to complete, I'm sure."

Harry scuttled off again, and headed for the Common Room. When he met up with fellow first years, he almost breathlessly asked, "Did you get the notes on the professor's opening speech?"

In disbelief, one of the older students laughed, "Potter, don't worry about it, he uses the exact same phrases each year. It's just his way of explaining that the class isn't wand-oriented, and that he doesn't want any goofing off. He doesn't test over it, so relax."

Wincing, Harry remembered the smirk, and told himself that at the least, he could NOT forget what he did get written of the speech.

Supper came and went, thankfully without a repeat of the night before, and Harry felt like he was beginning to settle in. He'd made a trade with Crabbe for a map. Well, at least, it would be a trade, when Harry got the last of the instructions to classes written down, and Crabbe sat him down to explain the difference between pea and grass greens. On the way back to the Common Room, Harry heard Malfoy pestering the youngest Weasley, and noticed the argument getting heated. The quieter it got, the closer Harry drew to it. He was lurking behind Goyle, when he heard Malfoy challenge the other boy to a wizard's duel, claiming Crabbe as his second, and Ron claimed Finnegan as his. Harry recognized Finnegan as one of the two boys who'd left with the redhead originally on the way to Potions earlier. The other one, Harry realized must be Thomas, then. Rolling his eyes behind Goyle, he waited for the two groups to disperse.

He let the other Slytherins reach the common room before he did, and muttered the password to get in. He stalked right up to Malfoy, and glared at him, "You do realize, Malfoy, that that challenge was made loud enough that anyone around could have heard. If you're stupid enough to actually go to it, you deserve the detention you'll get, but we don't need you getting points subtracted. Next time you want to challenge someone, make sure you aren't doing so with an audience. Or at least make sure the audience has incentive to not report it."

Luckily for Harry, the majority of the students in the Common Room had been focused on other things, and Harry had been pretty quiet, nearly hissing at Malfoy during his entire rant. Unluckily for Harry, he didn't know that the Head of their House was within hearing distance of his rant, lowly voiced as it was. Not knowing any of this, Harry stalked upstairs to work on the essay for Potions, and to maybe revise the ones for his other classes. He also wanted to make sure his things hadn't been tampered with, but the other served as his excuse to the rest of the House.

In short order, Harry finished the assignments, and prepared for bed. As he was finishing changing, Zabini, Goyle, and Nott wandered into the room, "Ah, Potter," Nott grinned, "Just who we were looking for."

Harry 'hmm'ed to let them know he was listening, but didn't commit to any words.

"Vincent mentioned you having issues with telling colors apart, and how he was going to use that to trade for a map," Goyle leaned on one bedpost, as Nott leaned against the other and Zabini folded his arms and rested them on the foot board.

"I noticed in Transfiguration, that you like to practice the gesture and pronunciation of spells separate," Zabini smirked, "I'll trade pronunciation tips for a map."

"I think I can help you get in touch with Longbottom," Goyle offered, "who is a veritable genius in Herbology only, in exchange for a map."

"Hopefully you remember what I'm trading a map for," Nott smirked.

Nodding, Harry agreed, "Sure, but you three realize I still need to get the instructions to Defense, right? To and from the Common Room, the Great Hall, and the other classes. When I get that, then I can fulfill my end of the trades."

"That's fine, Potter," Nott and the other two left the end of Harry's bed, "Its not like we will let you forget."

"Aw, wasn't this where you were supposed to say that this was the beginning of a beautiful friendship?" Harry quipped. The other boys laughed quietly, and prepared for bed as well.

I realized somewhere in the middle of typing the Potions lesson that Flying wasn't actually a class, and was quite possibly offered to all four Houses at once. I decided to leave it as it was, and continue. The whole bit about the House distancing themselves from Harry was based on their own fear of him treating them like the other Houses do. But when he started to catch on to the barter system, Harry proved Slytherin enough. As for the duckling approach, I'm sorry, but

Slytherin has always seemed to me to need a leader of some kind, and Malfoy looks to have taken that role in the original books. Here, Harry is just taking the role for the first years, long enough to disperse a map. We'll see what shapes up afterward. Meanwhile, though I'm not detailing the day itself, Snape did in fact, turn the speech for his first years into a pop quiz. He nailed all years with it too.

I did ask for people to point things out to me. Someone mentioned Harry realizing the importance of having his key to the vault in Gringotts, but not asking for it. This lack of asking was due to my own lack of planning, at best and worst. Having had it pointed out though, I am seriously thinking of making something of it when I get as far as the second year. Thanks to Vellouette for that one. Both the tip and the idea. For now, it's a case of Harry being more interested in learning about Wizarding culture than in acting on it. Now that I'm actively thinking about it, we can suppose that at that point, Harry didn't know if he'd have been allowed to carry his own key, so he didn't even bother asking. But now... evil cackle eh shrug I'll come up with something.

The next morning, as everyone filtered in to breakfast, they passed the counters that kept physical proof of the House scorings, and noticed a rather sudden drop in the Gryffindor counters. Harry remembered that in the bookstore the twins mentioned a prank they wanted to pull and pondered in a low whisper if it was their doing.

"Oh no," a chipper voice sounded from his right.

"We haven't pulled that prank yet," Harry quickly looked at the twin to his left.

He was still trying to come up with a definitive way of telling them apart, but he was guessing that Fred liked to stand to the left of George, which would put Fred to his left too. Not wanting to let them catch on and switch up their pattern, Harry kept to himself on that thought, and asked, "Then what's the point loss from?"

"Our baby brother got caught out in the halls last night with his friend Finnegan," George- he thought- muttered.

"Which lost Gryffindor twenty points apiece," Fred rolled his eyes, "And the prat's been whining about some coward not showing up."

"I warned Malfoy that people could have heard the duel being issued," Harry shook his head, "I suppose he either took that advice to heart, or had never intended to show up."

"Duel?" Fred's ears would have perked if his ears could.

"What's this about a duel?" George mirrored the action.

"Yesterday your little brother and Malfoy were getting in each other's space and arguing, and finally Malfoy issued a 'wizard's duel,' whatever that means and called a second, and your brother did the same. They arranged a time and place, and apparently, one pair got caught out last night."

"Well, well," Fred sighed.

"We had hoped to not have to use this," George reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. Harry wasn't sure how he knew it, but he was sure that just about anyone who saw it would know it came from the twins. He blinked as George handed it to him.

"In the halls, or during a class," the twins explained, in their tennis-match format, "Make sure Ron's there to see, and if you can, get Perce in on it too, but at least, have Ron there. Open this up and act like you're going to read it. If you have to, actually read a bit of it out loud if that's what it takes for them to catch on."

"Why?" Harry looked at each twin skeptically, "Are you trying to get me in a prank too?"

"Nah," Fred waved a hand about in the air, "This one is geared for our git-brothers."

"Sometimes we think they should have been twins," George snickered, "Just a matter of four years separating them, but they're almost exactly alike at times."

Harry nodded hesitantly, "All right, but if this gets me, you owe me."

Harry hurried to the Slytherin table to catch what he could of the first meal of the day before heading off to class.

On the way to Charms, Harry noticed that some of the other Slytherins were venturing through the halls more on their own. They kept within eyesight of the mapkeeper, as Harry was starting to think of himself, but were turning down corridors ahead of him. This gave him a hopeful feeling, letting him believe that he might not have to make so many maps. Luckily, Defense was after lunch, so he would be able to complete the map that night, with any luck.

In class, Professor Flitwick called for the essays, and in a few cases, managed to playfully lecture some writers about actually writing ten inches for their essays. Apparently, someone had tried to write an inch tall, so as to only have to write ten lines. Harry didn't understand why someone would be trying to dodge out of it, it translated to only a page paper back in his non-magic schooling. He was wondering

when they'd make them comparable to the ten and fifteen page essays he'd heard older students complain about back in Surrey.

The lesson went much the same as before. The professor explained the charm they would be learning, and demonstrated the wand movement and pronunciation. He cast the charm a few times, and then set the class to work. Frankly, Harry was a little disconcerted with this spell. He didn't see much sense in having a small glowing light appear on one's wand, but he obviously didn't count for much in the scheme of things. He'd just cast the spell, accompanied by the gesture, when the professor seemingly popped up from nowhere right next to his shoulder. Yipping, Harry fell right out of his chair, and into his neighbor, which happened to be Goyle.

"Oh dear," the tiny man apologized as most of the class laughed and snickered, "and you were so close to a successful casting, too."

As he stood to put himself back in his own chair, Harry heard from Goyle, "He seemed successful enough to me, sir."

"Oh?" Flitwick smiled encouragingly, "What makes you say that?"

The rest of the class complained about the blindingly bright light that had shot from his wand when Harry was startled. It apparently blinded everyone in the room momentarily, except for Harry and Flitwick.

"My my," Flitwick chuckled, "That would have been a successful casting if he'd been trying for a blinding flare, but he was just trying for dim illumination."

"I don't mind trying again sir," Harry muttered from his seat, "I'd have probably cast it four or five times anyway to make sure I understood how to vary the strength of it."

"Good, good," the tiny man trotted off, chuckling, "I'll leave you to it then."

After the rest of the class lost the flash-blind effect, the classroom filled with chanting again. Harry had, by this time, cast a much

weaker Lumos that satisfied the requirements for the assignment. This left him with time to play with the strength, and to wonder if he could change the color. When he had concentrated on a specific color to be issued from his wand to match the spell and gotten the desired results, Harry settled back and watched Goyle. Or he would have, if Goyle had actually been working.

"Were you trying to get a green light?" Crabbe, from behind Goyle was blinking rapidly.

"Is that what was different?" Goyle looked at his pseudo-twin, then back at Harry.

"You couldn't see?" Crabbe whistled a little on the 's' still, and Harry figured that was why they had been watching his goofing around.

"No," Goyle shrugged, "I watched him play with the strength of it, and knew there was something different about that one, but it was clear light, like the other times, to me."

"Well," Crabbe suddenly grinned, "I saw green."

"Oh my," Flitwick was going to either be hit as Harry flailed, or would give the dark-haired boy a heart attack with all the times he snuck up, "We have someone who can see the colors of spells, do we?"

"Sir?" all three boys chimed.

"It's not exactly rare, but neither is it common for witches and wizards to see the colors of spells," the professor continued, "Quickly, now, Misters Crabbe, and Goyle, I'd like to see your Lumos,' so I can continue with the lesson and this explanation."

Dumbstruck, both boys simply cast the spell, and then blinked madly when it actually took on the first try. Clapping proudly, the tiny professor gave them five points apiece for the timing being so precise that their spells occurred in unison.

"Now," returning to his podium with books stacked behind, the lecture was continued, "I'm sure some of you have been wondering what use Lumos will be to you. But suppose you are wandering at night, or someone casts the opposite spell of Lumos and you need to get around. In the former case, this spell will provide you with light, just as a torch would. In the latter, it may expel the other spell outright," nodding at the class, "and one could say they are counterspells to one another, but the general counterspell to anything is 'Finite Incantatum,' which we will learn specifically in another lesson. 'Nox' is a spell in its own right. Just as 'Lumos' is a lighting charm, 'Nox,' is as well, only it performs the opposite task."

With that, Professor Flitwick waved his wand, and spouted out, "Nox!" and the whole room fell dark. After a few seconds of silence, there was muttering, to the effect of, "When's he going to remove the spell?"

Rolling his eyes, and glad no one could see, Harry muttered to himself, "We're probably supposed to counter it ourselves."

To his right, Harry heard Goyle and Crabbe chuckle, and the two cast 'Lumos' again, their wands providing little beacons that drew the attention of the rest of the class.

"Good job, another two points apiece to you," Flitwick said from his podium, "That includes Mister Potter this time, for realizing my intent."

Going for broke, as it were, Harry decided to try the ending spell. He'd seen it cast twice in this class alone, and he was sure he'd seen it elsewhere. Picking up his wand, he waved it in the movements he'd seen, and called out, "Finite Incantatum."

Harry thought to himself that he was justifiably amazed that it had actually worked. Then he told himself, he must not have heard the professor speak the same spell at the same time. His hopes and fears were all resolved with Flitwick's next words, "Mister Potter, congratulations on successfully casting the charm. I've noted this in my book, so when we cover this in class, I will have another spell for you to practice that day."

Harry didn't know whether he liked the attention he was getting or not. It seemed like none of the professors felt he could mess up. Not that he was trying, but he wasn't getting scolded for working ahead, and he was only being praised. It felt like he was back at the Dursley's and was Dudley for once. He wasn't sure he liked it. Rather, he liked being able to do well, and be praised for it, but he didn't think he'd mind being told he'd done something too soon. Harry thought about asking Professor Snape about it, as the Head of Slytherin seemed like he'd help Harry keep humble.

"Now," Flitwick coached the students, "I want all of you to take a turn casting 'Nox,' and we'll see if we have anyone else brave enough to try 'Finite Incantatum.' Perhaps by the end of class, we'll be able to skip the Ending Charm entirely in my lesson plans and move on to bigger, better things."

By the end of class, most everyone had succeeded with 'Nox,' and the others exempted from the Ending Charm lesson included Malfoy, Parkinson, Nott, Zabini, and surprisingly Crabbe. Harry figured the last one had managed it so well because there were no sibilants in either of the words. As he moved with the cluster of students to their next class, Herbology, Harry heard Malfoy bragging about the duel from the night before. He didn't get many details, but he heard enough to know that Malfoy had purposely called the duel to get the Gryffindor into trouble. He also noted to himself to look up the phrase 'blood-traitor' when he got the chance.

This time, in Herbology they studied the Whimsies, and their cousins, in their final state. Parkinson quickly sidled up to Harry, calling him as her partner when they were told to pair up for the project. Harry laughed to himself, knowing he would most certainly be doing all the work. His thoughts were proved right when the girl leaned over to him and said, "My handwriting is much tidier, why don't I take notes?"

"Sure," Harry grinned back, "because we both will fail the assignment if I leave it to you to touch the plants."

She grinned back, and Harry thought there might be something to this business of trading skills that the Slytherins seemed so fond of. Each pair was to examine the four plants in front of them, and to note their

characteristics. They were to catalogue the similarities and differences, and from that information, they were to decide whether they had Whimsies, Mimsies, Flimsies, or Dimsies in front of them. When he heard this, Harry laughed to himself.

"What's so funny, Potter," Parkinson peered up from the notes.

"You don't like any of the four," Harry pointed at the plants, "Does that mean you can't tell the difference?"

"Exactly," the girl snorted, "I avoid them when I can, so I can only tell you they're all 'imsies,' as I like to call the grouping."

"Okay," Harry shook his head and started muttering details. By the time he was done looking at the four plants, he knew that they only had two types of flowers in front of them, and he told Parkinson that.

"How do you know?" She peered up from the paper.

"Well," Harry pointed as he spoke, "These plants, all four have similar stem structures, and leaf counts, from what I learned helping in my relatives' garden, that means they're the same family of flower. They have similar veining in the leaves, which agrees with that. But when it comes to telling them as separate types of flowers in that main grouping, there aren't enough characteristics to make them four different ones. Unless the 'imsies,' are different colors guaranteed. But the thing that tells me they're only two different types of flower is that the two on the left are pointing the same way as each other, and the two on the right are pointing the same way as each other. And each pair has moved to point in those specific directions whenever I've moved the flower pots they're in."

Nodding, the girl wrote that information down as well, "So now we just need to decide what the directions they face mean?"

"Pretty much," Harry nodded.

"Well then," the Parkinson peered down at the notes from the last two lectures, "Whimsies, having been subjected to cheery dispositions,

will face the sunlight, seeking its energy. The sun, itself is generally viewed as a giant source of happy energy."

"Well," Harry looked at the plants, one pair facing the two students working with them, and the other pair facing the table, "We can eliminate that variety."

"Good," the blonde girl made a notation on their paper, "Next, Dimsies, having been cared for exclusively with magic, will face the nearest, largest source of said energy."

"Huh," Harry peered at the plants, "I'm hoping that the pair facing the table aren't Dimsies, as that would be depressing, to be a weaker source of magic than a table."

The girl giggled, and pointed at the other pair of flowers, "What about them though?"

"They continued facing us, no matter how I turned them," Harry shrugged, "So they could be Dimsies, but I'm not sure."

"Flimsies," Parkinson read from the paper again, "were subjected to severe depression upon replanting, and will only face the ground, dripping tear-like se-cretions from their leaves."

Peering closer, Harry noticed the down-facing flowers did indeed have fluid dripping from their leaves, "That tells us which these two are," he pointed and Parkinson jotted down that information. Harry caught a glimpse of her writing something else, "What?"

"You got closer to the other pair too, and they snapped to focus on you," she pointed out, "So they have to be Dimsies. According to the lecture, Mimsies would have focused on anger, and you aren't angry."

Humming under his breath, Harry wondered if his partner in assignment would cooperate with an experiment. His thoughts were interrupted with a jolt of shock as the girl reached for one of the newly identified Dimsies and pulled it towards both of them. The plant seemed to stand up straighter, and turned to face Harry even more clearly.

"See?" the girl grinned as she quickly fobbed the Dimsy into Harry's hands, "Now that we have that done, we need to turn in the notes."

Harry, bemused at her seeming to read his mind, looked down at the plant in front of him, as Parkinson dashed off, "Go figure, eh?" He was amazed further when the plant seemed to nod at him.

"So, Potter," luckily, Harry had heard Malfoy saunter up, "Want to test a theory of mine?"

"I'll want to hear the theory first," Harry countered, looking up at the silvery-blonde.

Rolling his eyes, the other Slytherin boy pointed at the Dimsy in Harry's hands, "Never mind, it just told me all I need to know," and stalked off. Harry looked back down, and the plant was still staring up at him, or so it felt.

When the class finished the latest project, and cleaned up after themselves, they were given another essay to complete. Now Harry had a ten-inch essay on the individual uses for either Dimsies or Flimsies, to match the essay for Charms, on the uses of 'Lumos' and 'Nox,' and the extra-credit one of uses for 'Finite Incantatum.' He muttered to himself, on his way to the Great Hall, until he remembered that he wanted to talk to Malfoy. Just outside the doors, Harry stopped the blonde boy, and asked the question that had been bothering him all day, "Why call a duel?"

"About time you asked that, Potter," smirking, the other boy continued, "I challenged that Muggle lover to a duel so I could get him into trouble."

"What," Harry was trying not to yell, "would you have done if you had gotten caught as well?"

"That?" the aristocratic boy shrugged, somehow, elegantly, and looked away, "I never intended to show up to the duel in the first place. I told Filch when and where, saying I'd overheard Weasley

bragging about how he could wander anywhere without getting caught."

"And why would you do that?" Harry didn't know whether anger or laughter would burst out. He was angry that the other boy would do such things, but he was also laughing at Malfoy, for having nearly the same outlook on life as the youngest Weasley in the school, just mirrored on an axis.

"Look, Potter," Malfoy met Harry's eyes again, "Seeing as you were raised by the worst sort of Muggles, I should think you would understand. Muggles don't need to know about us, and Muggle-borns are just polluting the gene pool."

"Seeing as you've been raised knowing how Slytherins are seen in the world," Harry felt like throwing the phrase back in the other's face, "You should know how it feels to be hated or disliked over something as simple as an accident of birth!" From there, Harry stalked to the table, ate quickly, and went about getting the attention of the twins. He didn't like the thought of what he was going to do, in principle, but he really didn't like the whole aspect of 'My side is right' that seemed to pervade the school. He just hoped he could get the twins to help him. The irony of his own line of thought escaped him however, as he thought his way was right, as much as anyone else.

When the twins caught up to him, Harry figured they would conduct the conversation in the hall. He was surprised however, when the two scooped one of his arms in a hand of theirs apiece and more or less frog-marched him to a smallish room near a painting with a pear on it, without letting him hear the way they opened the wall that had blocked it. Once inside, the twins released his arms, and grinned at him, "Well?"

"Is there a way to include Malfoy in this prank?" Harry peered up at them.

"Why do you want to do that?" Harry decided to call this one Fred for now.

"I'm going along with your prank on Ron and Percy because they see the world as black-and-white, and need to learn that grey exists. Frankly, Malfoy's got the same problem, just from the other side of the spectrum, it seems."

The twins looked at each other, grinned, and then turned back to Harry, still grinning, "We knew we'd picked right with you."

"We've been pulling pranks," Fred started, and when George picked up the thought, Harry knew he was in for another tennis-match, "for the last two years, but were more concerned with having fun. This will give us a reason. See, our predecessors got lost in that line of thought, having fun only, and we didn't want to make the same mistake. You just gave us the perfect line to work from."

Blinking, Harry was beginning to wonder if he had created a monster, but was determined to make Malfoy realize that Muggles had just as much value to the world's population as wizards. And he wanted Ron to see that Slytherin wasn't a synonym to the word 'evil.'

"This does change things a bit," George rested his thumb under his chin, "We need to see the paper we gave you earlier."

Quietly, Harry handed it over. The two peered at it, and Harry only half understood the things they said. After a bit, the smaller boy wondered if they would want his input, then mentally shrugged and added his two - wouldn't it be knuts worth in this culture- anyway, "Wouldn't the easiest way to get Ron or Percy's attention be to put something like Pranking manual on the page?"

"Hm," Fred muttered, "A possibility, but we don't want the page summarily destroyed. See, it's a special kind of paper. It talks back to the person holding on to it. That in and of itself doesn't merit its destruction, but if we put anything indicative of us on it, it would be destroyed, and we don't want that."

"Not for this paper," George seemed horrified at the thought.

"Okay," Harry blinked, and noticed that the paper actually had writing on it, "Who are Messers Moony, Padfoot, Prongs and Wormtail?"

Chuckling, the twins explained that the quartet were the makers of the paper. Harry felt like they were holding something back, but left it. If they weren't ready to tell him, he would just have to wait, "So, would that alone be enough to get attention?"

"In Ron's case, sure," George muttered, "but that doesn't guarantee Perce or Malfoy will get involved."

"That's simple enough," Harry grinned suddenly, "I just make sure that Ron makes a fuss, when Percival around and Malfoy will automatically be around, as he has the same class today. Shouldn't be too difficult. Percival will fuss over Ron making a fuss, and the general fuss will get Malfoy involved. I'll just sneak off, and keep myself out of trouble. The only problem will be getting this back to you two."

"As long as Snape and McGonagall don't confiscate it, we can get it back," Fred smirked, "If it stays in Ron's hands, he'll get it to us. In Percy's case, we can snitch it back any time. He doesn't know we know the password he uses to lock his school trunk."

All three boys grinned. He was unaware of it, but Harry had just inducted himself into a Weasley twin ritual, when the twins chanted, "The first prank of the year," and he finished with, "Has begun."

The trio quickly scampered out of the small room, and headed their own ways. Harry dashed to his Common Room for his class books, and on his way out, noticed the other first years waiting just outside. He shook his head, hoping today would be the last day of it. He'd luckily gotten directions from older Slytherins at breakfast, and had drawn them onto the map. About halfway there, Harry noticed the cluster of Gryffindor first years led by the fifth year Prefect, Percival. He didn't think his luck could get any better if he tried. Harry suddenly stopped, with the rest of the Slytherins crowding around him, and pulled out the map he'd drawn, along with the paper the twins had given him. He made the second paper fall to the ground, and waited for someone to notice. Sure enough, Malfoy spotted it right off, and scooped it off the ground.

"Potter," Malfoy read the paper, and handed it to Harry, "Who are Messrs. Moony, Padfoot, Prongs and Wormtail?"

Trying to look relieved and not even trying to hide his nervousness, Harry took the paper, "Oh, it's just a paper I picked up--"

His sentence was interrupted by a redheaded blur dashing in and nearly ripping the paper out of Harry's hands. The dark-haired boy was glad he'd let go as soon as the other started pulling, as he didn't think the twins would like the paper getting torn. Harry looked up at Ron, and began to speak, only to be interrupted again, "How'd you get your hands on this? My brothers would never let anything this important fall into the hands of a slimy Slytherin! You lot would just use it to ruin everyone else's lives!"

Harry wondered how in the world the boy could have gone from being nearly a friend to having just as strong a distaste for Harry as he had for any other Slytherin. He set that thought aside to ask the twins about later, and tried not to smirk as the Prefect stalked up and took the paper from Ron, who yelped in surprise.

"Ron what kind of ruckus are you raising now, you know you need to be careful after the points you lost Gryffindor last- What do we have here?" Percy read the names, and not recognizing them any more than Malfoy or Harry had, muttered to himself about pretentious French people and their ridiculous nicknames. Harry had already started edging to the perimeter of the cluster of students, trying to be subtle about it. He'd reached the Slytherin first year wall of bodies, at the same time as Percy started yelping about whatever the paper had said of him. Snickering, Harry quickly and quietly led the majority of the other students away, and noticed that both Professor McGonagall, and Professor Snape had caught on to the commotion and were stalking their way. Harry and the first years on their way to Defense, minus, of course, Ron and Malfoy, were seemingly innocently walking to class, as the former two, and Percival the Prefect were yelping about whatever the paper said about them, or what the other two said.

As he passed, Snape lowered an eyebrow and peered at Harry sharply. Harry tried not to hold his breath as he passed, hoping that the Potions Master wouldn't grab him by the nape of the neck and call

him guilty by association. He was guilty, but only of providing the means for the three loudmouths to make fools of themselves.

Finally relaxing as the two Heads of House scolded two Weasleys and a Malfoy, Harry led the rest of the first years, using his map, to class. Just before the bell rang, Malfoy and Ron both dashed into the classroom and found seats. Which just happened to be not only next to each other, and in the front of the room, but also dead center of the row as well.

Midway through the class, Harry was fed up with the stuttering of the man teaching them. He'd met the man in London, when Hagrid had showed him the wizarding side. At the time, he'd noticed the speech impediment, and had figured it for shock. Now Harry figured it was a permanent thing. He didn't want to belittle anyone for something they couldn't help, but the man never got the point that if he was going to stutter over words like 'innocence' and 'purity,' he should find another way to get his point across. Harry was also very fond of the way the man seemed to linger over sibilants. Something about it made Harry think of a snake speaking, and by the time he'd admitted it to himself, the poor boy had a headache. If the class continued as it started, the dark-haired boy didn't figure on learning much more in this class than he'd learn in History of Magic. Maybe he'd be lucky enough that the tests at the end of the year would only cover what they read, not what the man would expect them to display in class. He wasn't expecting the man to be able to teach them how not to be hit by the Laughing Hex, or the Body-Bind.

As soon as class let out, Harry scooped up his papers and supplies, and dashed out of the class, heading for the Great Hall, for supper. Shortly after Harry had started eating, he noticed Snape stand from the High Table that all the school's faculty sat at, and stalk down the side of the Slytherin table. The already quiet table fell still as death. When the dark man stopped next to Harry, he whipped out a sheet of paper, and as he passed it to the small boy, muttered, "I'm only giving this back to you because Mister Malfoy made it clear you had it in the first place, Mister Potter. And Professer McGonagall felt it was safer in your hands than in either of Mister Weasley's. Just know, that I'm on to you, so keep yourself in line."

"Sir," Harry took a chance, and asked, "Is it so bad to want my classmates to not think everything is black and white, cut and dry? To want them to know while some things are definitely good and others obviously bad, there are things that could go either way? And that this same line of thought follows for people?"

"I never thought I'd hear a Potter speak in such a manner," it almost looked like Snape was surprised, but then, he could also be carrying the expression that comes with sucking on a lemon, Harry wasn't sure. With that, the Potions Master returned to his seat, and Harry, though he never looked up, figured that the man was going to watch him with an eagle eye, for the rest of the meal. Shortly after, Malfoy walked into the Great Hall, whatever punishment he'd been assigned apparently completed, and walked directly up to Harry.

"Potter, did you have to abandon me?" the blonde was whining, but Harry got the feeling that if asked, he'd deny it to his dying breath.

"I wouldn't have left you there if you would stop acting as bigheaded as the Gryffindor fifth year Prefect," Harry peered at the table on the other side of the Hall, and noticed the two redheads seating themselves to eat.

"I'm a pureblood, Potter," the other boy crossed his arms in front of his chest, and seemed to puff out a little, "It's in my blood to be arrogant."

"I'm not talking arrogant here," Harry glared darkly, and kept his voice low, "I'm talking about being able to see past family trees. If you could stop staring at the trees, you'd see the forest."

"That makes no sense, Potter," Malfoy rolled his eyes, "Trust a Muggle-raised wizard to get it all wrong. The filthy Muggles can't get anything right, not even raising the Boy-Who-Lived."

"That's exactly why I left you to your fate in the hall before Defense," Harry had had enough, and was too frustrated to eat any more. He stood and stared the pale boy in the eyes, "if you want to believe you're better than them, go ahead, I can't stop you. But if you want to prove it, do the research it takes to know what it is you're belittling.

Find out about how Muggles live, think, breathe, eat, and sleep. Take the time to get to know Muggle-borns, and why exactly they have such a hard time. Learn about whether or not they actually are inferior, instead of assuming that what your father says is right. Be a person, instead of a parrot. Prove you're better than the ones who look down on you, look past the prejudice!" Harry hissed the last words and stormed out of the hall, unaware that he'd actually garnered a great deal of attention from his rather quiet rant.

When he finally calmed down, Harry realized he was in an area of the school he'd never mapped out. He had no clue where he was, and was starting to get nervous. Of course, when he heard footsteps behind him, he jumped three feet into the air and tried to hide behind a suit of armor, hoping that would be enough to prevent a beating. He yelped quietly though, when a face popped up from either side of the armor, relaxing only when he recognized the red hair of the twins.

"Good on you, Harry," the one to his left, to be called Fred for now, Harry mentally noted, reached out and patted the smaller boy gently on the shoulder.

"We can call you Harry," George, on the other side nodded, "right?"

After his nod, the two helped Harry stand and dusted him off, "Let's get you back to familiar ground. As they walked, the twins asked for a repeat of Harry's speech, and grinned. When they reached a door next to a painting of fruit with a rather colorful pear, the twins stopped.

"Just so you know," the tennis match began again, and Harry was finally getting used to it, "This is our headquarters. We can't trust our roommates with knowledge of our plotting, and planning, and will only trust you with the password if you swear you're one of us now. We've got a name and everything."

Harry started to nod, but his stomach growled. He hadn't made much progress in eating his meal when Malfoy had arrived, and the first year had left without finishing. Grinning, George reached over to the painting nearby, and tickled the pear. Both twins crowded around Harry and whispered that that was how to get into the kitchens, and

their hideout was purposely near the kitchens for a reason they'd explain once they fed their apprentice.

Once inside, Harry was amazed at the bustle in the room. He stopped counting after he reached ten ovens with stoves on top, all with food on or in them. Whistling from teapots competed with the dinging of bells to signal the timers reaching zero. Harry could smell different meats, fruits, and even chocolate. Then he looked down to see who was doing all the cooking, and Harry jolted a little. They resembled to goblins in height, and wrinkly skin, but these tiny creatures had much longer ears, ears that didn't come to as sharp of a point. Their noses weren't as pointy either, but were even longer, Harry thought, than their ears. In relation, their eyes were the largest features on their faces. Harry was amazed to see that each of the little creatures was happily bustling over a stove, in an oven, or was chopping away at fruits, vegetables, or meats, stirring in bowls, or popping in and out of the room. Harry wondered how they did that, he remembered reading in Hogwarts: A History, that Apparition was blocked by wards over the school. He shrugged as one of the creatures spotted the three boys, and figured that it couldn't be Apparition then, but some skill rather similar.

"Is Masters Wheezey needing food?" the small creature approached the trio hesitantly, peering up. Harry noticed that it had a tea towel tied around it, with the crest of the school sewn into a corner, and wondered if it was an apron or a uniform. He figured he could ask later.

"If you would please," Fred grinned, and George added, "Some for our friend here too, if you would, he ate even less than we did before he dashed out of the Hall."

"Is we elves not cooking to the pleasing of Masters Wheezey?" the elf had already turned and begun to gather some food.

"Oh no," George began this time, "Our friend was in a rush to leave, and we figured he'd get himself lost, so we just chased after him to help out."

The elf peered closely at Harry, then its eyes went so wide, Harry almost put his hands out to catch the globes, he was sure they were going to fall out of their sockets, "Masters Wheezey is bringing Master Potter to us elves! It is being an honor to meet you Master Potter!"

Harry blushed as the twins chuckled, "Yes, it's an honor to meet you also, I've never eaten so well in my life," After saying this, Harry wondered what he'd done. Nearly every elf froze in apparent shock, their eyes all wide enough that Harry thought collecting them would fill a couple bags after falling out.

"Master Potter is being too nice!" one of the other elves began to cry, "We house-elves is just doing our jobs, and Master Potter is being too kind and thanking us!"

"Uhm," Harry looked at the twins in panic, and realized they had no better idea of what was going on than he had, "Why shouldn't I thank you for doing your job well?"

With that, the elves all clattered back to work, and Harry got the feeling that they were going to try and do even better than before, just because they had been told they were doing well. The elf that had greeted them approached, carrying a huge tray of food, and handed it off to the twins, "When Masters Wheezey and Potter is done eating, you's is only needing to put all plates and silverware on the tray and one of us will being picking it up. Yes?"

The boys nodded, rather frantically and dashed out of the kitchen. Again, Harry didn't catch the password, as this time, one twin was nearly cackling while the other said it. When all three boys settled down, Harry was teased for his thanking the house-elves and setting them astir.

"I'd never heard of a house-elf before," Harry muttered between mouthfuls of roast beef sandwich on wheat, "How was I to know you don't thank them?"

"Your relatives didn't teach you anything about the wizarding world, did they?" came the semi-rhetorical question.

Harry shook his head in a negative fashion all the same, "I think they'd just as soon not know anything about it at all. If they could be made to forget entirely, they'd be just as happy. Or happier, considering they wouldn't know what they're trying to forget anymore."

"Well," Fred piped up after a mouthful of Pumpkin Juice, "We just wanted you to know that with that, you passed our test."

"You can now consider yourself a full-fledged," George brandished a piece of paper, "Junior Marauder."

"Why junior?" Harry pondered, "do I have to finish an apprenticeship kind of thing or something?"

"No," George grinned, "We're just Junior Marauders too."

"We won't take the title of Marauder without our teachers' permission," Fred smirked, "And we've never actually met them to ask permission. All we have is that piece of paper we lent you to get Ron, Malfoy and Percy with."

"Speaking of which," George rummaged around, "I suppose we should work on getting it back."

"That's going to be a pain," Fred joined his twin in rummaging through piles in the small room, "I heard that both McGonagall and Snape were there, and Snape confiscated it."

Finally having a chance to surprise the twins, Harry pulled the paper from his bag, "You mean this?"

Gaping, the twins gingerly pulled it from Harry's hand and inspected it, "How'd you?"

"Apparently," Harry grinned, "Malfoy was quick to tell that it was among my belongings, so Snape felt it was okay to return to me."

Rather than cheer, like Harry half hoped, the twins suddenly began cast various charms and spells on the paper, after a bit, they stopped,

and relaxed a little, "It doesn't look like the bat of the dungeon cast any tracking charms on it."

"And the cat of the tower certainly didn't put any hexes or traps on it either," the other twin muttered."

"Oh," Harry blinked, "I didn't think of that."

"That's okay," Fred perked up, "We'll get you into the habit soon enough. Just know we've pulled enough pranks in classes that McGonagall and Snape both would love to find our hideout, and each of them try to get us back sometimes."

"Kind of like a prank war?" Harry found himself both scared and exhilarated at the thought at the same time.

"A bit," George nodded, "but it's also a lot like they're trying to find our headquarters to infiltrate and capture. That kind of thing."

Harry started to get nervous, but he was determined to try and get others to quit being so polarized in their view of the world. He'd lived so long stuck on one pole, he didn't know what to make of others voluntarily gluing themselves to other ones.

"Okay," Fred relaxed a little more, "Now that we have that scare out of the way, we can get to the rules of this group."

George nodded, "Firstly, we won't prank you if you don't prank us. And, you shouldn't prank us unless we prank you first."

"When we do prank someone," Fred listed number two, "Prank only the deserved. Since we're going to try and show off the grey of the world, we prank only the loudmouths constantly spouting black-and-white nonsense. As of right now, that's Ron and Malfoy. We're sure to pick up other targets."

"Thirdly," George reached out to Harry and tapped him on the nose, "Don't be afraid to tell the other Junior Marauders that you think its getting out of hand. If we're getting too extravagant, we'll get caught.

If we pull too many, too close together, we'll get caught. If we target just one or two people, we'll get caught."

"Or worse," Harry had to add, "They'll start getting us back."

"We really wouldn't mind that so much," Fred grinned, "There were four Original Marauders, and with just three of us, we have a lot of living up to their names to do. If there's more of us, the work is spread around a little more."

"Finally," George finished, "We shouldn't limit ourselves to just one house. That's the trap the Marauders fell into. They started off pranking to get a laugh out of people. By the time they left though, they were pranking the Slytherins only to get a laugh out of the other three houses."

"Personally," Fred agreed, "We think that might have a hand in why so many Slytherins went to You-Know-Who's side."

"I thought I'd heard somewhere that that was called harassment," Harry muttered.

"Exactly," the twins grinned, "So, now we've got that spelled out, we should work on a new prank."

"Where do you get the material for your pranks?" Harry finished eating and put his flatware onto the platter the house-elves had lent them. He blinked as it disappeared from the room with a small pop, "that would be a nice trick too."

"We pay enough attention to our classes to get the spells and charms we need," Fred pulled a notebook out and opened it up.

"We research potions that will help," George held out a list of ingredients, "and the preparations needed."

"What about keeping track of what you have or haven't done?" Harry was getting a little bogged down by the lack of organization.

"Why bother?" Fred shrugged one shoulder and George shrugged the opposite, "We know what we've done."

Harry sighed and gave up for the time being, and the three began working together to plot another prank. After a while, Harry realized it was getting close to curfew, and he not only had to make it back to the Dungeon, he also had his assignments still to do. Shrugging his bag onto his shoulder, Harry waved to the twins as he dashed out.

"Oh, wait," Fred stood and crossed the room to Harry, "We still need to give you the password!"

Harry paused in the doorway before opening it, "Okay."

"You want to stand with the painting of the pair about three feet to your left and look straight ahead as you say this," Fred instructed, "Make sure no one is in visual or hearing distance, then say, clearly, but quietly, 'E equals em cee squared.'"

"What?" Harry blinked.

"We don't know how to set passwords yet, but this was the perfect room to use. It was right next to the kitchens in case we wanted to sneak anything into the food," George explained, "it even came with a password. It's just a little odd, but it's not difficult to remember to get in. When we figure out how to change passwords, we are definitely changing it. Too easy for others to catch on to now."

Nodding, Harry dashed out of the room and towards Slytherin's Common Room. He reached the room and sat down quietly. As he kept an eye on the time, Harry finished rough drafts for the essays assigned that day, and pulled out decently clean sheets of paper to redraw the map onto. After the fourth, Harry realized his hand was cramping, and shook it out. Looking at the time, Harry figured he'd better wait until the next day to work on any more. He packed up, stood up, and halted abruptly as he reached the door to the sleeping quarters of Slytherin students. The Head of House was standing there, arms folded over his chest, waiting, and as Harry got closer, it became clear who he'd been waiting for.

"Follow me, Mister Potter," the man muttered and led Harry to his office. Harry sat quickly in the same chair as he had before, figuring it would be best to get the lecture over with quickly, and hoped that the professors hadn't decided that the prank he'd helped with was enough to get him tossed out of the school. Harry only looked up when the man spoke again, "The only reason you aren't being held responsible for the prank on Misters Weasley and Mister Malfoy is that it was harmless. None of them got as far as assaulting one another physically, and even the insults they did use were mild. I was already aware of the existence of paperwork by the Marauders, otherwise known as Misters Moony, Padfoot, Prongs and Wormtail, and apparently, so was the younger Weasley boy. Your having it in your possession seems to have unsettled him. Maybe he will take the blinders off of his eyes."

"Sir," Harry chanced speaking, "I really am just trying to get them to quit thinking that the world is as simple as they're trying to make it. If a person was automatically good or bad based on their name, or where they lived, I would- Well, I wouldn't be who I am, sir."

Harry was surprised that the professor was going to let the slip slide, but Snape simply made the suggestion, "I would advise you, and the Weasley twins, as I'm sure you're an accomplice of theirs now, to not let the power go to your heads. The Marauders I spoke of were pranksters as well, and they fell to that vice. By the time they graduated, they pranked anyone they wished to, simply because they could. They didn't care about the dangers their pranks posed either."

"I don't intend to prank just anyone sir," Harry paused, "If I were to prank anyone at all, it would be someone who deserved it, who had done something to actually deserve it. Not just by being alive."

"Still, Mister Potter," the Professor stood, indicating the audience was ending, "don't take after the Marauders, and while you're at it, don't follow the Weasley twin route either. They only care about the schooling they receive enough to fuel their pranks."

"If I could find a way to get them to focus on schooling better," Harry paused at the door, "Would that make any difference?"

"I can say," Snape stood still, to Harry's right, "that if those two focused on school more, and goofing around less, they would have no problems in class. As it is, their only problems stem from lack of organization and focus."

"I'd noticed," Harry blinked.

"If you could fix that," the man shrugged, "then your association with them would be quite mutually beneficent. Just be careful to not become too Gryffindorish. That will cause more problems than it is worth. As a Slytherin, you should give the air of being interested only in how things benefit you. Your father, however a pure Gryffindor he was, was also Slytherin enough to sneak his way out of trouble at all times. If you can manage that type of balance, and keep your mindset as you are, you will already be a better example of a Potter in my opinion."

That line of thought and speech led Harry to believe that the professor had been a victim of many Marauder pranks, and that the Marauders had been Gryffindors. It even hinted to the boy that his father had been a Marauder. The sheer venom expressed when Snape spoke his surname also was a cause of thought to Harry, he wondered aloud why Snape hated the Potter name.

"I'm sure by now," Snape drawled, "You've heard plenty of stories about your father. They will have painted him golden, nearly sainted him, I'm sure. Just know not to believe everything you hear about him. No one is that good, that pure."

"If I thought it would help sir," Harry peered at the man through his bangs, "I'd apologize for whatever my father did to you. But I know it won't so I can only ask that you keep in mind that I'm not him."

"Obviously not," Snape smirked again, and Harry began to get suspicious of that smirk, "He never would have allowed himself to be Sorted anywhere besides Gryffindor. Apparently Potters have been Gryffindors for so long, some think the words are synonyms to one another. Now, it's time for you to be getting to sleep. I'm not your surrogate father, so leave."

As he scuttled down the stairs to the first year dormitory, Harry didn't know whether to laugh at the way the professor ended the conversation or worry that he was leading the Potions Master to believe he felt as though the man had the role at all.

Forgive my blunders with plants. I'm neither botanist nor florist, though I did spend two months working in a grocery store's floral department. I floundered along best I could, but feel free to tell me I'm full of hot air with flowers. I would also appreciate it if anyone would tell me if I'm making Harry too mature. I haven't been eleven for quite a while, so I'm more than a little worried about having forgotten how it feels.

I'm posting this in thanks to you all soo much for the reviews, and the morale boosters. I have spent so much time ignorant of the existence of C2s, and now I have a story that's on a few. I've actually found myself rather fascinated with the hit counter. Not that I don't want reviews, but I write to get the stories out of my head, and would probably continue posting this without the support. I'd just probably stop after finishing the first book worth, speaking of which, I'm just about done writing my outlined chapters for book one, and will next outline book 2's story/events. We'll see just how strange things get in the coming chappies. Or, well, you will when I get that far in posting, won't you?

In the weeks following their first prank, Harry, Fred and George became not-so-affectionately known as the 'Terrible Trio,' a nickname that Professor Snape coined, and much of the rest of the school adopted. Though, only Snape was even remotely certain that about half of the pranks pulled were at their hands.

That's not to say that no one suspected. In fact, Ron, according to the twins, was starting to pick up on a pattern. When he spouted off nonsense about dark things being evil and bad, or Slytherins being evil smarmy gits, he got pranked. As dense as he could be, even the youngest Weasley male could see that. Sadly, his assumption was that Harry was merely the messenger, and had no clue that Harry dreamt up some of the pranks pulled on him. After all, who else would think Harry capable of helping the twins to make a candy that left Ron unable to say anything at all if he couldn't say anything nice? Harry's personal favorite was the prank that left Ron and Malfoy chained to each other during double Potions. They'd been assigned to work together, and the chain got shorter with each insult they flung, longer with each time they were polite, and finally was removable when they apologized to the class for their rudeness. Harry suspected that he'd only stayed out of trouble with that one because Snape didn't seem to believe Harry could have known enough to set the spell in the first place that bound the two.

As one of the brighter students of Hogwarts, Granger didn't take long to catch on to Fred and George being behind some of the pranks. After discussing it with Harry, who thought that if she could provide her brainpower, they could do almost anything, the twins gave her a test. Instead of pulling the prank, she turned it in to a professor as evidence, and nearly got all three boys detention with Filch for a week. They resolved to keep away from her in future, but as the girl was merely a stickler for rules, they weren't making her a target. Besides, Harry had a suspicion that the girl kept back enough information from the prank they tried to get her to participate in that she could use it later to really nail their coffins together.

Upon joining the Junior Marauders, the first thing Harry did was to talk the twins through each prank, saying that they should leave documentation behind so that he could continue after they graduated, possibly picking up others to help him. He wrote down the details they

listed, and the twins were pleasantly amazed at how much easier it made other pranks. They had more than half of their research done already, and could spend more time on actually planning out how to not get caught. So they let Harry document the pranks, keeping the paperwork in the room next to the kitchens.

Trying to be subtle, Harry also talked the twins into actually studying, telling them that they never knew what might spark other prank ideas. After all, if they used the exact same method every time, they'd become predictable, and that would kill the fun of the pranks. Agreeing, the twins started becoming suspicious that Harry was really just trying to bring their grades up. To which, Harry countered, "Don't consider it studying. Consider it research and development recorded for posterity. Proof that you actually know what you're doing. Who knows, we might be able to turn some of this in to Zonko's and get patenting money off of it."

That little detail sparked an interest in the minds of the twins that Harry wondered if he should regret. They decided to change their pranks from one-off creations to things they could repeatedly manufacture. The first such thing was a set of quills they'd make to write on their own. The twins said they had the idea from the quills reporters used, called Quick Quotes Quills. The trio's quills, rather than having settings for truthfulness and brevity, were set to attitudes. They could be set to Saccharine Sweet, Grumpy Guss, Funny Fanny, and Boringly Normal. The quill supply was bought during a Hogsmeade outing of the twins, with money Harry lent them. He said it was an investment, and they'd see if the quills actually sold to anyone. They wound up giving one to Professor Flitwick, who had agreed to help them work out the bugs in attitudes for the quills. They also lost one to Professor Snape, as one of the twins had dropped a quill into Ron's bag, and the Gryffindor first year had let it write his notes during class. Obviously, that was a Quill they weren't getting back. They weren't sure if they could even admit to having made them later, with him having possession of it, but they figured they could wait to patent them until after they'd made a few other things.

With the work entailed in creation of the Quills, and various pranks, it was a given that the grades of the twins would steadily climb. Well, it was a given with Harry telling the twins to go ahead and put the

answers down if they knew them, it would mean fewer people challenging the patents they'd put in later. The professors as a whole were glad to see the twins actually putting in effort to their classes, but no one was exactly happy about the prank increase. After all, with the increase of quantity, was a matching increase in quality. The boys got caught out less and less often, and no one was happier than they were with this fact.

With help from the twins, Harry learned enough of the school's geography to get around. Thus, his maps were finished a few days after the first Defense class and he gave copies away to the Slytherin first years after the others carried their ends of the deal out. By the time the exchanges were complete, Harry had a better understanding of why the Potions book was so specific on color, which pureblood rules he would need to follow and understand while living in Slytherin, and was much more comfortable with his pronunciation and wand movements for Charms and Transfiguration. The mini study group of first years worked on the assignments for History and Defense together. Both professors proved either too boring or too difficult to understand, and over time, the other first years seemed to notice Harry knew more than he had originally seemed to about the class work. He never thought about it, or he would have realized that working with the twins, two years his senior was having a positive effect on his class work.

He did notice, though, that he had a measure more time to himself. The time spent with the twins made his assignments easier to accomplish. Though he hadn't found ten-inch essays much of a challenge to start with, now his only challenge was not doubling or tripling those amounts and losing points for writing too much, as Granger had found herself doing time and again. Especially in Potions. Having more time to himself left Harry working more and more on projects with the twins, which led to his assignments becoming even quicker to finish still. So Harry started to wonder what he could do with his spare time, and made the mistake, he thought, of mentioning this in front of Fred and George.

So they dragged him to a Quidditch game. Since they wanted to keep an eye on him and discuss tactics, and prank options, it had to be a non-Gryffindor game. The game somehow managed to be Slytherin

versus Ravenclaw. Harry watched, and found himself enthralled by the flying. He wasn't impressed with the Slytherin team's tactics, as it seemed to rely rather heavily on beating the snot out of their opponents, rather than actual skill in playing. Even though, he was mystified by the tricks each player could perform in the air. He'd enjoyed what little airtime he had gotten with the lessons with Madam Hooch, but she generally only allowed each student to touch off the ground for five minutes at a time. The next time they could take flight would come up again after everyone else had had a chance as well. This was so she could actually monitor them for trouble. She'd learned her lesson with Longbottom's flying blunder at the first lesson.

After the third time of trying to get Harry's attention and failing, the twins chuckled and sat back to watch the game as well. After the game was over, Harry snapped back into the world of the land-bound, and looked at Fred. He'd finally learned to identify the twins by the placement of freckles on their nose. At first, he'd made them nervous by staring intently at their noses, but after a couple days, Harry had been able to memorize the patterns so that he only needed to look for a second at the nose of the twin he was facing to know which one he was talking to, "Fred, is there a way to get a decent amount of time in the air on a broom? I don't know if I'd want to play Quidditch, for certain, but I do want to fly more than five minutes at a time."

"So now you can talk?" Fred teased.

"We thought we came out here to find something to do with your spare time," George added, and Harry rolled his eyes at the two of them.

"I can't help it if I enjoyed the game, heavy handed as my Housemates were," Harry drawled, "I've never seen flying outside of television stunts, and Flying lessons with Madam Hooch."

"Television?" Fred blinked, "Oh that must be one of those muggle things."

"Don't mention that around our father," George waved a hand around dramatically, "He'd want you to discuss with him every piece of the

device, and how it came to work the way it does. He's painfully fascinated with Muggles."

Laughing the three stood up in the bleachers and headed back to the school proper. Harry began to think he'd found something to do with his spare time, but he wondered how to arrange time on a broom outside of class. He was still thinking about this when they happened to pass the Headmaster.

"I couldn't help but notice, Harry," the long-bearded man interjected into the conversation the twins were holding, "that you were utterly lost in the game."

Nodding Harry peered at the elderly man, "Professor?"

"Your father played quite well in his days as a student," Dumbledore nodded and waved the boys to continue down the bleachers, "I suspect that it may be a trait carried true in you, as I seem to remember several Potters on the team through the years. Though it would be a shock to them, I'm sure, for you to join the Slytherin team, they would be proud of your supporting your House."

"I don't really like the way they play," Harry shook his head, "I mean, their tactics were... Well, I don't know if I would actually call those tactics."

Chuckling, the Headmaster tugged lightly on his beard, "Perhaps, then Mister Potter, you should join them, if only to change them for the better, as you've done with Misters Fred and George Weasley?"

Harry paled and blinked, noticing the twins were as flustered as he was as the Headmaster chuckled some more and wandered off. As Dumbledore turned down a hallway, the three looked at each other and finally expelled their breath in one gush.

"I don't know that anyone knows how that man keeps informed," Fred nearly whispered.

"Yet, somehow," George wasn't speaking any louder, "He seems to know almost everything that goes on in the school."

The three went their separate ways, and Harry turned towards the Dungeons. On his way, he encountered Malfoy. The paler boy looked like he couldn't make up his mind whether he wanted to sneer at Harry or not, but settled for a half-sneer that Harry rolled his eyes at, "Why did you sit with the Weasel twins, instead of your own Housemates?"

"So sorry I have friends outside of Slytherin," Harry grumbled, "Makes me regret deciding to ask you a question. Think I'll go find someone else to ask."

"No, wait," Malfoy grabbed Harry's sleeve, "What were you going to ask?"

"You seemed like the one who knew the most about Quidditch in our year," Harry prefaced, "So I figured you could help me. Is there a way to fly on school grounds outside of playing Quidditch?"

"For first years?" Malfoy smirked, "There's practically no way to get off the ground for us 'ickle Firsties' until next year. Not even with Quidditch. We aren't allowed a broom, and that makes it difficult to play. Especially since Madam Hooch keeps the school-owned brooms locked up when they aren't in use."

Harry sighed, "Oh yay, that means I'll have to wait until next year."

"Next year might be the best time," Malfoy agreed, "Our team is losing its Seeker. That's the most important position on the team, you know."

"No I didn't," Harry responded sarcastically, "I'd only had it explained to me within the first week of classes."

"Oh yes," Malfoy smirked, "When they thought they should scout the Boy-Who-Lived, and learned you were Muggle-raised instead. Perhaps I'll try out next year for Seeker."

"Do you actually want to play?" Harry hadn't noticed a special interest in the game from the blonde before this.

"I don't care either way, but if they have no one else, I'll try out. Who knows, having such a pivotal role on the team could win points with my father."

"Shouldn't you play for you?" Harry was puzzled, "Instead of someone else? Isn't your own enjoyment worth something?"

"You're still on your 'making everyone else get all fluffy' kick, aren't you?" Malfoy rolled his eyes.

"I don't know about making everyone else all fluffy," Harry huffed, "but I really think you need to learn to live for yourself, rather than the expectations of others. Ultimately, it's a life better lived. That's the main reason I want to know if it's possible to fly outside of Hooch's lessons."

"Talk to our Head of House," Malfoy sneered, "He might be able to come up with something. He might actually bother to help you, since you seem to have so much fun pestering him in the first place."

Snorting, Harry countered, "Well, I wouldn't have to seek him out so much if you lot would just answer questions, instead of trying to make every one of them a trade of some kind. Oh, and just to pay for this question, I'd advise you to avoid Ron Weasley the next few days, his brothers have a prank planned for him." Harry stalked off, having paid for the question he'd asked. Of course, he didn't bother to tell the blonde that there was a prank in the works for him as well. Harry figured that the blonde could use the warning to avoid getting double-dosed, and Harry could claim it as a favor in return.

When Harry reached the Slytherin Head of House's office, he paused. He hadn't realized he'd gotten a reputation for seeking out Professor Snape so much. It was pretty much as he'd said. He asked the dour man for assistance more often as the rest of his house would expect payment, while the Potions Master had made it clear early on that maintaining his Potions grade was the payment expected in his case. Which Harry was all too glad to do. He had come to enjoy the class. He'd never really liked cooking at the Dursleys, as he couldn't get Aunt Petunia to explain where he'd messed up recipes, but in Potions,

Professor Snape was quite happy to tell a person when they had mixed up ingredients, timed improperly, or just plain chopped things too largely. Harry did think that those pointers could be given in gentler tones, but after the third explosion caused by Longbottom, Harry was quite aware of how dangerous the potions could be.

"Were you intending to come in and ask your question, Potter," the door swung open, and the professor in question stood with a raised eyebrow at the boy in front of it, "Or were you going to join the portrait as a guard for my office?"

Harry tried to keep the professor from noticing, but he rolled his eyes at the sarcastic remark. He also bit his tongue, so he didn't return a comment. He was still learning what kinds of remarks he could get away with with this professor, and which ones would get him in the cauldron-scrubbing kind of trouble. Mustering up the words, Harry asked, "Sir, is there a way to fly on brooms outside of Flying lessons?"

"I wondered when you'd ask," Snape shrugged, "it seems it truly is in the blood. From the Headmaster, I gathered that each generation of Potters was involved in Quidditch."

"I'm not so sure I want to play Quidditch sir," Harry paused, "But I am definitely interested in flying itself. It... I... Well, it sounds odd to say, sir, but the flying itself, it, well, it makes me think of freedom, and," here Harry trailed off, losing the words he wanted to speak entirely.

"Ah," Snape nodded, "In that case, I'll see what can be worked out. I won't promise anything, as there are rules against first years owning brooms, but there aren't any against borrowing a broom from the school. Else, the Weasley twins would not be Beaters for Gryffindor. I suggest you check with Madam Hooch. Likely as not, she'll let you use a school broom, unless one of the teams is using it for practice. She might demand you have supervision. In which case, you'll have to locate someone responsible to make sure you don't plough into the ground and snap your fool neck in two."

Nodding, Harry thanked the man for his assistance and dashed out to find Hooch's office. After a while, Harry realized that that was one

room the twins had never pointed out to him. Wandering around, he became lost in thought, until as he stood on a set of stairs, he realized they were moving. Groaning, Harry tried to mentally plot a way back to ground level. He paled and groaned again when he realized that the stairs had moved to the third floor corridor that the Headmaster had expressly warned about at the Welcoming Feast. Harry turned to go back down the stairs, only to have them move the other end as well. With a third groan, Harry resolved to chance the hall, hoping that he could safely find a door that would lead to a quick passage back to ground level. He figured that maybe Hooch's office was near the Quidditch field, instead of actually in the castle.

Quietly as possible, Harry wandered the hall, wincing at each sharp footfall, and at all the dust. It seemed that even the house-elves avoided this hall. After quickly trying three doors and finding them leading to utterly dusty abandoned classrooms, Harry was about to give up and turn around back to the stairs. He heard what sounded like a cat meowing and tried not to make a lot of noise as he reached for the next, nearest door. It was locked, but Harry muttered a quick "Alohamora," and whisked himself to the other side, leaning against the heavy wood for a few breaths. A sour smell led Harry to look up, and he squealed in his own mind as it churned for a way back out. A huge, three-headed dog was looking at him. All six eyes screamed 'Food,' and all three mouths growled and slobbered messily. As it snapped one head at him, Harry whipped the door back open and dashed to the other side. Pulling it back closed amidst muffled barking and snarling, Harry ran back down the hall the way he came and just caught the stairs as they took another meandering to another location.

When his heart finally began beating at a normal rate again, Harry pondered the placement of the dog. He vaguely remembered hearing about a three-headed dog in Greek and Roman mythology from the older kids at his old school, but couldn't remember what it was called. He thought about asking Hagrid, whom he'd occasionally encountered on school grounds. Then he had to ask himself, "Why would a three-headed dog even be in the school? That's obviously what would cause a gruesome death to anyone wandering up there, but why is it there?" A little pondering and Harry remembered Hagrid again, but this time, it was the incident of Hagrid removing a small

bag from vault seven hundred thirteen, "Could the dog be protecting what Hagrid pulled from that vault? I mean, I remember seeing a newspaper article about Gringotts being broken into, and I think it was the same vault, so I guess whatever was in the bag was pretty important. So I suppose the dog would be guarding it. Perhaps I should just write all this down to keep it straight. I mean, it's an interesting puzzle, but to investigate it would probably get me into trouble, and Slytherin doesn't need to lose points just because I'm nosey."

Eventually, the dark-haired boy found Hooch, and spoke with her about borrowing a broom to fly on. She eventually agreed to allow him to fly more during lessons, and if he had a responsible observer, he could fly during his free time. With some persuasive wheedling and a couple of liberal applications of puppy-dog eyes, which Harry wasn't sure he was very good at, she caved and let Harry use Fred and George as his 'responsible observer.' He never noticed that he'd had an audience during his muttering through the halls after his encounter on the third floor.

I just need to know if there is more description needed, or if I'm gasp too descriptive. Comma check would be nice, but is not mandatory. My computer has a rudimentary grammar check, so any other fine-tuning in that department would be nice. As well as typos. Hate those.

Eh, really text driven, this chapter was. Sorry. But at least I'm not telling the story a chapter to each day of schooling. I'm working out a way to explain exactly why Harry tries so hard to get the Slytherins to play nice. It has a lot to do with the way he's viewed back in Surrey, if that helps anyone any.

Not to say that he forgot entirely about the three-headed dog in the third floor corridor, but Harry found himself more focused on classes than in figuring out more information on the slavering beast. Classes, homework, trying to actually spend time on a broom outside of class, and planning pranks took up enough time that Harry began to wonder what kind of loon he'd been earlier in the year, wanting more things to do with his time.

As October approached, the twins became more and more prone to finishing each other's sentences, tricking people by pretending to be each other, and in dropping little candies and toys around that the trio had created. By this time, they'd made candies that turned people into animals, a variation on the Canary Creams. Joining the Canaries were Catnip Crunchies, Puppy Poppers, Gerbil Gobstoppers, and the trio had just worked out the final details on their newest creations, which they affectionately called Rat Rations, in honor of Scabbers.

To curb some of their energy, because he just couldn't keep up, Harry challenged the twins to dream up a prank fitting for Halloween, to take place during the feast at supper that night. Rising to the occasion, the redhead duo drew up plot after plan after scheme, throwing each out on this particular night for various reasons. Finally, they dreamed up one that met with their approval, and showed it to Harry. The first year wondered how they would pull it off without getting caught, but the twins said that they'd just have to 'fall victim' to their own prank for that. In which case Harry made sure that he'd only eat food containing Catnip Crunchies. He wasn't keen on becoming anything so small as a gerbil, canary or rat, but he didn't want to be a puppy at this point either. He wasn't sure that he'd be housebroken quite yet in that form.

Not that knowing which trick treats were to be in the food was all they needed to be ready for the prank, but Harry was just making sure he was turned into something he could tolerate. On a lark, Harry thought of having the twins test the candies to see if they canceled each other out. Laughing, the twins found a way to do just that, using their friend, Lee Jordan. Testing revealed that only the first candy eaten would transform a person, as their body would have absorbed the chemicals and ingredients of that one first. This told them they wouldn't be able to market the whole lot as a whole, under the name, 'Chimera Grab

Bag,' which made Harry feel better, even if it didn't make the twins any happier.

The rest of the prank, and planning for it, kept all three boys busy enough with studying that Harry found himself cemented in the title of the 'Ravenclaw of Slytherin.' The twins reported that there were several others threatening heart attacks at the suddenly Raven-ish behavior in the two previously anti-studious Gryffindors.

One day, midway through October, Fred called out, "Eureka!"

"Oh?" George didn't even look up from the notes they had on incorporating noise into small rubber balls.

"I finally got it to work!" Fred crowed as he waved a small pink rectangle under his twin's nose.

"Okay, so you got the sounds into the thing, that doesn't mean the whole thing will work," George pulled back from the hand in his face.

"That's what testing's for," Harry had been brewing the requisite materials to make the plastics they wanted to embed the sounds into.

"That's the simple part," Fred grinned, "After all, we made these so they'd dissolve in fluids!"

With that, he threw the tiny thing into Harry's glass of water, and all three winced, shuddered, but grinned as Harry's water was suddenly singing a Weird Sisters song. It was wobbly, but it was loud enough to hear through the water. As the pink object finished dissolving, the song tapered off, until finally, all that was left was a quiet glass of light pink water.

"Now, we need to see if you can put sounds other than the Weird Sisters into those things," Harry smirked at Fred and handed him a handful of the pink sticks that resembled chalk. Fred groaned as George and Harry snickered, and all three went back to work.

Over the rest of the month, they worked out all the kinks, prepared the pieces, and had just decided to place the fragments of the prank

so they would come together at supper when they encountered the Gryffindor ghost bemoaning his repeated failures to join the Headless Hunt. Without thinking, Fred asked why Sir Nick had never made it, and all three boys were hard pressed to keep their stomachs still at the squelching Nick's head made when he grabbed himself by the ear and pulled. This showed that the ghost had missed complete decapitation by a spare inch of flesh, and apparently, that was just enough to have him disqualified for the Hunt.

This left the boys more or less talked into going to the Death day celebration Hogwarts ghosts had put together for Nick, and that made them glad that supper wasn't for a few more hours. When they left the room filled with rancid, rotting food, all three boys realized that their prank wasn't going to happen in time, as they couldn't set it up now without getting caught. So they stored the pieces they could, and planned out minor pranks to use the rest in to tide themselves over until next year. One such was the idea of taking the Singing Sticks, as they'd named the pink water-soluble objects, and dropping them into water glasses in their Common Rooms that night. If the trio ever got around to packaging their projects, they'd be careful to make sure no one thought the Singing Sticks were edible. Harry at least was going to leave the objects lying around and surreptitiously spray them with jets of water from a new spell he'd found called 'Aguamenti,' or the Hydrating Spell. He didn't want to pollute anyone's drinking glass.

With the delay of their prank, the trio wasn't as excited to see the feast arranged for the last day of October as they would have been otherwise. Their spirits, pardon the pun, picked up when they arrived at their tables. Harry had heard of parties for this holiday before, but the people involved had been obsessed with the concept of pitting neon orange with black and blinding their audience. Or the hosts had smothered their home with props in an effort to create a mood, ruining it instead. Of course, Harry didn't hold the comments as gospel, as they had come from his Aunt Petunia, who thought the holiday was rubbish. That didn't seem to stop her from letting Dudley go out to parties each year dressed up, when he threw tantrums to go.

In this instance, the tables had remained the same, covered with cloths of the usual colors, but instead of plain flatware, in honor of the holiday, the plates had magical creatures painted on them. At least,

Harry thought they were painted. As everyone settled, Harry took the time to look at his plate. The figure on the plate moved like the photographs Harry was still getting used to. When, out of curiosity, Harry picked up the fork and moved it towards his plate, the wolf started getting antsy and growled. The lack of sound told Harry that the plates were enchanted the way photos were in the Wizarding world and Harry was reminded of the prank he and the twins had wanted to set up. He mentally took notes and was determined to add that information to help with the prank for next year.

The Headmaster stood, said a few words, similarly to at the beginning of the year, and then encouraged the school to 'dig in.' Harry half expected the flatware to turn into shovels and trowels, but wasn't disappointed when they didn't. When the food began appearing on the plate, the pictured animal also seemed to get food, and thus it didn't react when Harry used the eating utensils around it. Harry ate fairly quickly, as he still had to make it back to the trio's headquarters to write his observations down, or he'd forget them entirely.

As Harry was about to stand and leave, he noticed that the stuttering professor wasn't at the meal. He had enough time to reflect on this and set it aside in his mind, when the doors to the Great Hall slammed open wide as they went, and the formerly missing educator rushed in, screaming, "Troll!" When he had made it three quarters of the way through the room he suddenly shrilled, "Just thought you should know," and fainted dead away. Harry blinked, remembering from what he'd read, and from discussions with Fred and George that trolls were big, nasty, stinky, and bad-tempered. Oh, and stupid. Harry didn't want to know how a troll got into the school.

Dumbledore stood tall, and called to the now panicking students, "Everyone, calm down, please. Follow your Prefects to your Common Rooms, and we professors will deal with the troll."

Slytherins lined up quickly and quietly, in counterpoint to the noisiness of the rest of the school. The Hufflepuffs were horrified, and huddled together in clumps around each of their six Prefects. The Ravenclaws seemed excited, and more than a little worried, and were more organized. The Gryffindors were in complete chaos, jostling each other and arguing. Luckily, their proximity to the doors made it

easier for the Houses of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff to leave the Great Hall quickly, and without the pushing and shoving that came when the Gryffindors tried to push past the Slytherins. During the mess, Harry overheard Ron and Longbottom discussing how Ron had been rude earlier in the day. Apparently Ron had gotten fed up with Granger's 'know-it-all' tendencies and had snarked about how no one would want to befriend someone so bigheaded, or something to that effect. Harry almost pulled a prank on the redhead right there, but he glanced up and realized that the twins were looking straight at him. They shook their heads and grinned. That told Harry the other first year would be dealt with.

After escaping the Great Hall, Harry quickly diverted from the river of students, trying to find Professor Snape to tell him about the missing Gryffindor. He'd even take McGonagall if he could find her, but he wanted to tell someone that Granger would be somewhere in the school, ignorant of both the troll and the lockdown. Suddenly, he heard a noise that made him look up. There was McGonagall, glaring at him darkly.

"Mister Potter," she began, "what part of 'go to your Common Room do' you not understand?"

"I'm sorry ma'am," Harry explained, "I'll be on my way there, but I felt I should tell you that I overheard Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom talking about Hermione Granger's absence from the meal. They seemed to believe she'd been somewhere else much of the day, and therefore wouldn't know about the current crisis."

"Hm," the woman peered at him closely and nodded, "Fine, you've told me, now go to your Common Room, or you'll not only lose points, but you'll also get a detention."

Nodding, Harry turned in the direction of his Common Room, and heard the professor move to follow him. After a bit, she seemed to decide he was going where he said he was, and turned off in another direction. Harry wondered to himself if she would have followed him in the first place if he'd been a Gryffindor. That situation was really starting to irk him. No one trusted Slytherins, as the older members of the House said at the Welcoming Feast, but the other three Houses,

it seemed, could practically get away with murder. He was going to wait at least until after winter break, and then he was going to start planning things to fix the problem.

Harry was snapped out of his musings as his foot slipped in something on the stone floor. Harry balanced himself, and then paled. He'd stepped in slime. Apparently the troll had a runny nose. Shuddering, Harry looked around, and found a veritable trail of it. Following the trail, Harry hoped he'd find a professor to tell about it, and show it, because he certainly didn't want to find the troll. He was aware of the dangers of following the trail, but didn't see himself as having much of a choice, it was follow the trail and find a teacher, or go to the Common Room and wonder for the rest of the night who the troll got to.

The smell got stronger, telling Harry he was getting closer to the source, and he winced. Looking ahead, there was a door. He thought it was one of the girls' bathrooms, and he guessed that was where the troll had hidden itself. Harry counted himself glad that he'd been placing little noisemaker toys in the slime. They would both help clean the mess, and dissolve in the sludge, quite noisily. This would draw attention to the trail, and would lead the professors to the room

Harry turned to leave the area for his Common Room, and then froze. The noises he'd heard from the bathroom weren't just troll grunting and snarling. There was high-pitched screaming and shrieking mixed in. Harry moaned to himself; it was just his luck that the place the troll hid was the same place Granger had hidden herself to cry about a redhead's rudeness.

He didn't dare leave assuming that an instructor would get there before the girl got killed. He knew that none of the first years knew any spells that would incapacitate a troll. The things weren't just smelly, they were thick-skinned and -skulled, and so most hits wouldn't affect them but to make them madder. Harry quickly cobbled together a plan. He'd get the troll's attention, and make it chase after him. He'd run away just fast enough to not be caught, but not so much as to make the troll return to the girl, and he'd find an adult to take care of the problem.

With that thought, the slight, dark-haired boy pushed open the door to the bathroom, and gasped at the sight of the destroyed sinks and bathroom stalls. In the corner, huddled, was Granger, whimpering, bruised, and beaten. The troll stood before her with its club raised, about to pummel her again. Not really thinking, Harry tossed one of the noisemakers left in his pocket at the troll. As it landed on the wet floor, it squawked loudly, getting the troll's attention. It turned, looked at Harry, who threw another noisy ball at it, and ran out of the bathroom. It followed him out the door that had just barely closed behind the boy, and started to follow him down the hall. Harry found himself running faster than he'd planned. He'd read that trolls were slow, but the books must have meant it was slow in comparison to an adult, or to other creatures, because Harry had to run with all he had to keep ahead of the creature, screaming loudly all the way. He only just barely registered the black blurs as he passed them. Stopping for a second, Harry recognized Professors Snape, McGonagall, and Flitwick following his trail of tricks. He whirled and stopped, "Professor Snape, the troll's right behind me!"

The trio of adults looked up, and sure enough, the troll had gotten close enough to read them as targets. It started to swing the club at them, but they fired, almost in unison, a Stunning Charm straight at it. It fell to the ground, out cold, and they turned on Harry.

"I thought I told you to go to your Common Room, young man!" the Gryffindor Head of House thundered, "This isn't even on the way!"

His own Head of House, meanwhile had crossed his arms over his chest, and was balancing his weight on one leg. Flitwick had returned to peering at the slime and the pranks. Screwing up his courage and determination, Harry responded, "I was on my way to the Common Room when I found the trail. I didn't think farther than leaving a trail for you adults to find when I had reached the bathroom that's down this hall. The door was closed, and the trail ended there."

"And?" Snape prompted, sure there was more to it, "Did you prod at it to raise its ire after it had found a place to hide, Potter?"

"N...," Harry fidgeted and shrugged, "Yes and no. I hadn't intended to do anything after that. I was even on my way to leaving the hall

altogether when I realized that there was someone screaming inside the bathroom, where the troll was."

"Oh, my," Flitwick looked up, "Lead us there, Mister Potter, we need to assess the poor child's health!"

The four of them trooped over to the bathroom in question, and the door was pulled open to reveal Granger herself. Her face was covered in tears, and the rest was covered in plaster and dust, but she was fairly healthy.

With a deep sigh of relief, McGonagall put a hand to her chest, as the Gryffindor girl walked completely out of the room and turned to Harry, "Thank you so much for saving me, Harry Potter, I think that swing you distracted it from would have killed me."

With that the girl dashed off, with McGonagall's call following her, telling her to head for the nurse to get herself checked. Harry relaxed just a touch; the girl really would be okay. He then looked at his Head of House and flinched. The expression on the man's face wasn't in the slightest bit friendly.

Shaking his head, the dark-haired man drawled, "I knew the family traits would out eventually. Don't make a habit of playing hero, if you will. We don't need the added adventure. I will say, however, that it was good you thought at least of leaving a trail. If you hadn't, you could have been the dead student instead of Miss Granger."

"Combine that with your distracting the troll from its captive prey," Flitwick added quickly, "and you kept any student death from occurring."

Sighing deeply, McGonagall pursed her lips. Harry didn't consider himself an empath, but he swore he could feel her reluctance in what she was about to do, "Ten points for your quick thinking, heroism, and sheer dumb luck, Mister Potter." With that she whirled around, presumably to ensure that her student made it to Madam Pomfrey.

As Flitwick turned toward a second direction, Snape and Harry turned in a third, back towards the Slytherin dungeons. After a bit, Harry

realized that the Potions Master was limping. As he surreptitiously observed, there was a rip in the side of the man's robe, and Harry thought he saw blood trailing down the man's right leg.

"Sir," Harry shocked himself by actually asking, "were you going to get that treated by Madam Pomfrey? Or do you have something in your office to fix it with?"

Without stopping or even missing a beat, Snape growled, but without any real venom, "It's none of your business, Potter."

Not entirely sure why he was going to, Harry smarted off, "So I should ignore it if you're still limping in class tomorrow?" And with that, he scuttled for his Common Room as though a hound from Hell was after him. And who knows, he could have been right.

Please forgive me if I'm giving the trio the run of pranks that sound harder than they would have been able to pull, but I am of the mindset that the twins were smart enough to dream these things up, and only lacked the concerted drive to actually do so. So with the 'patented Potter prodding,' some of these things can come about a little early. I will try to wait until at least third year for the Skiving Snackboxes though. If I can.

One last thing, as a thank you for giving me 50 reviews, I asked #50 what picture they wanted. The request was for an immortalization of the concept of the first years in their parade movement. It can be found on deviantart. Add the dot com to the end, and put toranekohybrid and a forward slash in front, and you'll reach my profile on that site. It should be the most recent picture added, and should have the words 50 review in the title.

Thanks to SpiderLily for catching my silly mistakes. Can't believe I misspelled disclaimer... uh oh going to check all the rest for that same flub. Just to warn you all, there could be a slow down, I just realized that the second half of the year is going to fly by and that won't work so well. So I may have to rewrite my chapters, starting with the next one, to reflect that. Meh, shouldn't hurt me too much, it's you all I'm worried about.

After the events at Halloween, Harry did everything in his power to stay out of trouble. This was made doubly necessary as both McGonagall and Snape were watching him closely. Within a week, Harry began to feel as a mouse in the fields does, knowing there are hawks and tiercels waiting for it to show its fool head so they can sweep it into the air for supper. Understandably, this cut back on his participation in the pranks. As nervous as he was, Harry couldn't help but notice that Malfoy, Ron, Longbottom, and Granger were all watching him closely as well. At the start of the second week, Harry felt like a clock wound too tightly, and took to avoiding any and every living thing outside of the Slytherin Common Room. He, of course, relayed a message to the twins concerning this, but Harry was not about to get himself into trouble heading for the room near the kitchens. Nor was he keen on leading anyone to it.

Just as Harry was about to snap, Granger approached him on his way from the library, asking if there was a way for her to help with Harry's stress. Rolling his eyes, Harry drawled, "If you could get Ron and Longbottom to quit staring after me all the time, and stop doing so yourself, I'd feel loads better. Then I'd only have Professor Snape, Professor McGonagall, and Malfoy left to drive me starkers with the staring games."

The girl nodded and seemed a little hurt. "I didn't mean to make you nervous, H- uh, Potter, but I have been trying to figure out how to thank you for saving my life."

"You did so at Halloween," Harry shrugged. "Not only did you say the words, you also gave proof to McGonagall that I was telling her truthfully what happened. I don't know if she'd have believed me otherwise."

"It doesn't feel like it's enough," Granger paused, "but I will definitely work on Ron and Neville staring. Get back to me when you come up with something else for me, will you?"

She left, and Harry puzzled out what she meant. He vaguely recalled Nott's explanation of wizards hating having someone else save their lives. As he headed back to the Slytherin quarters, Harry tried to remember why exactly that would be. In his distraction, Harry didn't

realize he was being followed, until he was swooped upon at the turning point from common paths to the Slytherin dungeon paths.

"Now Harry." On his left was George, grinning from ear to ear.

"We know you said you felt too nervous to go anywhere but directly from class to class, to the Great Hall to Slytherin Headquarters," Fred piped up on the right side of Harry as both snagged his arms and performed their favorite frog march.

"But we couldn't let you stew any longer." George took up the chain of conversation again.

"So we're taking you out to the Quidditch field," Fred smirked as he finished, "and we have the Headmaster's permission, so the other two can't get mad until and unless we miss supper."

"Oh, and don't worry about Hermione turning us in either." George grinned as the twins dropped Harry's arms upon reaching the center of the field, where a rather large trunk sat.

"We used her Wizard's debt to you to get her to swear not to interfere." Fred laughed a bit at Harry's expression, then reached for the trunk.

Harry told himself he was going to look up the concept later, but was presently more fascinated by the presence of three brooms in the field. He turned and watched the twins wrestle with the contents of the trunk that had been waiting for the trio on the grass. One pulled out short bats that looked somewhat familiar, and the other twin pulled a large, dark colored ball that looked to be made of leather. It began wrestling around the twin who carried it, and Harry's eyes widened. Meanwhile the other twin was pulling out a slightly smaller red ball, which was quite still. Harry liked this ball better, as it wasn't trying to kill anyone.

Grinning, George refused to release the leather ball from his hands. "We're here to scout you, Harry, more or less."

"Sure, knowing what role you'll likely play when you join the Slytherins will be helpful." Fred picked up a broom, handing it to Harry. He then picked up the other, only this time he handed it to George, who had finished his rather one-sided struggle with the wild ball of leather. Harry mentally decided that the ball had won, as it was flying through the air as it pleased and George was rather breathless for his efforts.

"We're sure you remember the walk-through the Slytherin team gave you at the very beginning of the year." George straddled his broom, and nodding to his twin, both rose in the air on the sticks.

Following them into the air, Harry felt compelled to ask, "How did you get Madam Hooch to agree to this?"

Grinning, George nodded at the larger ball flying viciously about them that he and Fred were casually batting around the pitch. "There hasn't been a game of Quidditch in a couple of weeks. We just convinced her that if she didn't let us take them out to warm up with-

"-they'd be right next to bonkers when they got let loose in front of a stadium full of watching fans," Fred smirked. "It just took a little wheedling after that."

"Ah," Harry shook his head, "So why only the one Bludger then?"

"As good as we are, we're testing your skills at each position as well." George seemed to be trying to be humble.

"It's a lot easier to manage just one Bludger, as they're almost docile in comparison." Fred grinned, "Rather like us, if you believe the stories others tell."

"They say we're more likely to be Bludgers reborn as humans, but we rather think they're jealous." George agreed.

At times, Harry could only agree, after all, who but human bludgers could have dragged him out here when he was determined to stay where he couldn't possibly get into trouble?

"Or its just Lee being Lee," Fred smirked.

"So you know the basic names and their functions," George began, as he flew close enough to the ground to pick up the red ball, the Quaffle. "I'll take the role of a Chaser, Fred'll be a Keeper, and you take on the role of Beater. That means your job is to keep me from getting the Quaffle, getting it past Fred or through the undefended hoop. Got that, Harry?"

Nodding as Fred passed him a short but sturdy bat Harry had seen in use so many times in the Quidditch games, Harry asked, "Just out of curiosity, what would you say of your Seeker?"

"Eh, she's not too bad." George hovered in the air for a bit, then continued flying. "She's blind as a bat without her glasses -kind of like you- but last year, when she was a first year, Hooch had the devil of a time actually getting her onto a broom."

"Silly little thing is terrified of heights," Fred chuckled.

"And she's a Seeker?" Harry wondered what kind of idiot would play a game suspended in the air when they were acrophobic.

"See, that's the deal," George smirked again. "She was terrified of the idea until she actually watched a Quidditch game. In her first year, she was amazed by how quickly injuries get healed and figured that if she could play, she'd try."

"She's still scared out of her mind on the staircases," Fred grinned, "which is great fun to play with, but on a broom she seems to forget about the height. We don't know how good a Seeker she is yet, as Gryffindor hasn't had a game, but Wood's hopeful."

"You guys had a game," Harry contradicted, Slytherin and Gryffindor had already played, "Against Slytherin."

George waved it off. "We don't count that one. Bole sent a Bludger at her five minutes in and it whacked her silly. Strangely, we think he was honest when he said he didn't mean to hit her in the head."

"It sounded like he was aiming for her shoulder or feet," Fred nodded, "Something that would just take her out for a while, not for the whole game. Less likely to get pulled out of it himself that way. We lost, but made them fight for it all the same."

"We'd like to think she'd have caught the snitch before Higgs," George shrugged, "but now we'll never know, unless we can wrangle our way back up in Cup standings."

"And keep Bole and Derrick from whacking her again," Fred rolled his eyes, then smirked some more, "Of course, the way she's been picking at them since then is hilarious. If it weren't for the fact that she's another one of those 'how'd that Ravenclaw get into Gryffindor' types, we'd have asked her to join the Junior Marauders, too."

"She's like Granger?" Harry blinked.

"No..." George tapped a finger against his mouth. "She's, well..."

Fred added his two cents worth. "She researches the oddest things. Spends hours upon hours looking up strange facts, but it's none of it related to studying for class. She's queen of the trivia games, but not so hot with actual spell casting. Mixes words up something fierce. All that research though, means no problems in classes."

"She doesn't even take notes," George smirked, "but she's probably one of ten people who actually got a passing grade on that pop quiz Snape let loose on everyone, you included."

"Why?" Harry wrinkled his nose.

"She was as fascinated by it as you," George grinned, "Of course, her problem was that she had all the points, just flipped around. I think it went, in her head, something like this, 'I'll teach you to brew death, bottle glory, and put a stopper in fame.' She thinks the only reason she still got a passing grade was because she had all the words, just not in the right order. Some of us others in the House think it's just as likely because he thought her slip was funny enough he almost laughed."

"Oh." Harry nodded. "I've seen that paper in his office. I go there a lot to ask questions, since asking anyone else involves a trade of goods, and I don't have the time to think up all the trades I can work out. With Professor Snape, it's just a matter of continuing to do well in classes."

"So that's why you're a Raven in Snake's skin!" the twins snickered.

Harry pointed at the Quaffle. "Yeah, well, shouldn't we start now that we've spent too much time talking about a Seeker that can't see?"

"Okay," George grinned, "Crash course in Quidditch begins now!"

He and Fred both flew up, to be level with the three goals. Harry followed as quick as he could, and asked how they were going to get the Bludger into play.

"That's your job," Fred laughed. "We're going to sit here and chat until you reach the Bludger and hit it our way. From then on, you keep trying to hit the Quaffle from George's hands, and I'll keep the Quaffle from going through the hoops. After a bit, we'll switch."

Harry flew out to the Bludger, and noted that as wild as it had seemed when the twins were taking it out of the trunk, it was nothing compared to the insanity of the ball when it was out, completely free. He swung the bat at it, to direct it towards Fred and George, and was amazed when the ball shot off in their direction, even before he smacked it. He flew after it, quick as he could and called out to them that the ball was acting self-directed.

When Harry managed to catch up to the sadistic ball, it had swung itself at Fred's head, and then it had swung back to take a swipe at George. Harry, sighing loudly, asked, "Are these things always this vicious?"

"Oh yeah." Fred nursed the whiplash he'd given himself to get away from the Bludger that had nearly knocked his head off on its own orders.

By this time, the ball had swiped at George, and was bee-lining for Harry, who held out the bat to one side, waited for the ball to get close enough and swung. He smacked it towards George again, aiming for the Chaser-twin's broom, hoping to miss, but still to unsettle him enough to drop the Quaffle. Instead, the ball swerved for George's ribs, and narrowly missed, clipping his spine just a bit. It still had the effect of George releasing the Quaffle to fall to the ground, but at least Harry had a chance to give the boy guarding the goal posts a breather. With it chasing after the other redhead, Harry paused for a bit to judge where he'd try aiming it next time, as it came flying back at him. Yipping to himself, Harry swept out with the Beater Bat and cracked it solidly across its middle. This sent the ball off wildly, past the stands, and the first-year groaned. With the Bludger out that far, George was free to pester Fred at the goals. The only good thing about the situation was that George had only just flown to the ground to pick up the Quaffle, and returned to the usual plane of play when the Bludger seemed to put on its brakes and swerved back. It came flying for Harry again, and he had just enough time to ask himself if the Bludgers were able to pick targets, when he swung at the mad ball, and missed. Luckily, he had moved himself to the side as he swung, so it missed his shoulder by an inch or so.

"Okay," Fred said, having watched Harry's struggle, decided to change things up, "George, toss me the Quaffle, and pull your Beater Bat, you and Harry are going to smack the Bludger back and forth, see if he's any good at that."

Nodding, the other twin complied. Harry found it much easier to smack the leather ball at a nearby target when the other boy was also maintaining control of the ball with his bat. After a few minutes of this, George looked to his brother, "Fred, you ready?"

The Quaffle was passed again and the twins made it clear to Harry that the two 'Beaters' were to swing the Bludger at the twin with the Quaffle, and shrugging, Harry went along with it. He'd accidentally shot the Bludger into his own feet, and banged it on one of the poles supporting the hoops that the Quaffle went through by the time they performed their next switch.

"Pass me the bat, Harry," George called as he tossed the Quaffle to the first year. Fumbling a little, Harry caught the red ball, then tossed the bat in return. "We're going to start you off with dodging the Bludgers, then after a while, Fred'll put his bat away, and you'll pass to each other."

Fred added. "Then we'll pretend I'm on the opposing team, and first you'll try to keep the ball from me, with George helping, then you'll keep it from me with him trying to help me."

By the time they finished having Harry play Chaser, Harry knew he'd much rather be on the team with the twins on it. The effect of finishing each other's thoughts wasn't just orchestrated to confuse the unfamiliar faces. Each twin seemed actually able to read his brother's mind. When they felt Harry had been Chaser long enough, George called out, "Toss me the Quaffle. We'll try you out as on Fred's team first, then with both of us on the same team. So far you're holding up pretty well."

"Though you'll take a lot of work to be a great Beater or Chaser," Fred encouraged, "you're at least not horrible."

Harry had just come to the conclusion that the Keepers got a bad rap when everyone thought the game's victory or defeat was decided by the Seeker, when a timer sounded from the grounds of the pitch.

"That means we have about ten minutes to get the Quaffle and the Bludger into the trunk, get ourselves cleaned up, and to the Great Hall," Fred nodded as he whacked the Bludger in George's direction. Said redhead caught it, and let it drag him a bit in the air, before changing his grip on it, and flying to the ground. The Quaffle had fallen to the ground shortly after the timer sounded, as no one had been holding on to it, and no one had bothered to catch it.

Harry had just reached six feet from the ground when a gold flash suddenly flew past him. Harry looked off after it, to the tune of the twins arguing, somewhat seriously.

"Why'd you do that?" George groaned, "We'll never catch it before Supper, and then Hooch will have our hides to decorate her walls with."

"We can say it was an accident," Fred listed, as Harry, on a whim, followed the flash of light. It was both easier and more difficult to see now, as the sun was setting.

Harry got far enough away that he didn't hear Fred's other excuses, such as, 'who says we did it? We could always say that someone else forgot to put it in after practice, she didn't check the trunk before letting us use it.'

Harry caught the tiny golden ball with wings, and flew back in time to hear Fred starting to list a third point, but he stopped, looking at Harry in surprise. This expression was mirrored on George's face as Fred breathed, "By George, I think he's got it."

"Next year is going to be fun." George grinned. "Harry as Seeker on the Slytherin team."

"Our poor Seelie won't stand a chance," Fred groaned, "and we're gonna hear about it."

"Who says I'll actually play on the Slytherin team?" Harry smarted off, as he tucked the Snitch into the last open pocket of the trunk that held Quidditch supplies, "I don't like the way they play."

"You could always lean on them until they rely more on tactics than cheating," George grinned.

"You know," Fred added, "use it as an opportunity to continue what you've already started. That whole crusade of getting Slytherins to prove better by far than anyone expects them to be."

"Hm," Harry actually had a thought on that already, "They might have to get a whole new team together on that though. Most of their players really don't seem very good, they rely on dirty tricks too much. But if I hint at it just right," Harry trailed off, then grinned at the twins. They grinned back, "I'm actually starting to like this idea. I'll work on it,

and get back to you. Next year, if the whole Slytherin Quidditch lineup has changed, you'll know how well it worked."

"We're just going to wait for their tactics to change," Fred laughed.

"Well, Harry," George took up one handle of the trunk, and Fred the other, and both started off for Hooch's office, "We'll turn this in, and you'd better get cleaned up and to the Great Hall."

Following those suggestions, Harry made his way to the Great Hall with about five minutes left before the meal was set to start. He wandered in the general direction of the Great Hall, in no great hurry, and encountered, of all people, Captain Flint. So Harry decided that it was never too soon to test out the waters in regards to getting the Slytherin Quidditch team to play rather than terrorize the other three teams.

"Hey, Flint." Harry looked up at the fifth year. "Tell me if I'm wrong, but wouldn't you rather win the Quidditch games because your team is honestly better?"

"What makes you sure we aren't?" Harry could tell this was going to be a challenge, his opening volley into the conversation rankled with Flint right off.

"That's exactly the problem," Harry shrugged, "As far as I see it, anyway."

"What would you know?" Harry could tell Flint was angry.

"How often does your team use methods that ensure the players on the other team can't play—" Harry looked the older boy straight in the eye as he said this, and caught a flinch, "-rther than training until they drop to prove they're better players on sheer merit?"

"So you're saying that you think it would make a difference if we left off with the tricks." Flint smirked. "They'll still say we cheated when we beat them out of the air honestly."

"So?" Harry rolled his eyes, "Back in Surrey, it didn't matter whether I did well or not, but I chose to do as well as I could, for me. Besides, are any of your players thinking of going professional?"

Flint paused.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the only teams that look at Slytherin players are ones who play like Slytherin does," Harry continued, pretending to be ignorant of the expression on Flint's face, "and just how well will those teams play?"

"All right, Potter," Flint nearly growled, "how do you propose to change all of this, if you know it all so much?"

"I'm not saying I know it all," Harry snapped back, "but I know this: I don't want to play on Slytherin's team if all I'll be known for is playing for the cheating team. I'd like to see how good a Seeker I could really be."

"How does that help any of the rest of us?" Bole had caught up to the two of them at this point.

"For one thing," Harry drawled, "you could work on your aim. I heard that you were aiming for feet or a shoulder, and you caught the Gryffindor Seeker in the head."

Wincing, Bole nodded. "Yeah, we've been working on that."

"Most of us on the team can actually play." Higgs had also caught up, and the Quidditch team, plus Harry sat at the Slytherin table almost as one.

"That's better than I was hoping for," Harry sighed.

"Oh?" Flint raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah," Harry grinned. "I was hoping some of you were actually players, but I was worried that for this to work, the whole team would have to be replaced."

"Who says you have a say in this?" Derrick snapped, as the House around them began digging into the food on their plates. The team followed suit and began eating as well.

"Well," Harry grinned, "for one thing, even if I don't play on the team next year, I'd like to be on the team that wins."

"So do the rest of us, Potter," Bletchley smirked. "Why else do you think we play the way we do?"

"Because you're afraid you aren't good enough to win any other way." Harry met the eyes of all the players. "If that's okay, how are you going to make yourselves get better?"

"So," Warrington speared a broccoli stem, glared at it, and laughed as Pucey suddenly couldn't figure out where his potatoes went, or how in the world all that broccoli got there instead, "What's your plan, Potter?"

"We don't want to lose our chance at the cup this year," Flint smirked, "So whatever you're planning will have to wait."

"Not exactly," Harry finished his glass of pumpkin juice, "We could train even harder, but you could still, I suppose, use the same tactics to finish the year. Next year can be the unveiling of the Slytherin team that the scouters will want to see."

"You're starting to intrigue me." Flint nodded. "You're saying we finish this year, playing like we always have. Next year, though, because we'll have been practicing, we play without the tricks, and we'll still win?"

"We have to." Harry smirked. "To prove to the rest of the Wizarding world that Slytherin doesn't mean cheating, sneaky, evil gits."

The Quidditch team gave Harry a look, as if they weren't sure what to make of him.

"Potter," Malfoy butted into the conversation, "Why are you on such a crusade?"

"When I found out I was a wizard, I was told that my family had been killed by a person from Slytherin," Harry started, "That person also said that all of that man's followers had come from Slytherin. Then I spoke with the twins, who almost have to be the Gryffindor equivalent to a Slytherin, and they said that Slytherin wasn't all bad. I spoke with a couple of others, and picked up a few books. They all agree that Slytherin is the darkest House of Hogwarts."

"That's not telling us anything new," Higgs muttered under his breath.

"I'm getting there." Harry rolled his eyes. "When I finished all the books, the only impression I got about Slytherin is this: Does dark mean evil?"

"Potter?" Malfoy was puzzled, and most of the rest of the boys surrounding him at the table had the same expression.

"When you close your eyes, you don't see any light," Harry explained, "but the lack of light isn't evil. Nor is light automatically good. I remember hearing older students back in Surrey talk about things like that sometimes. No, it was never a conversation I was allowed into, but just hearing that was enough. They were arguing over whether or not it was always wrong to steal."

"Of course it is," Malfoy smirked. "That's a stupid question to ask."

"So, a man who steals just because he can is no different from one who steals to feed his four children," Harry looked the blonde in the eye, "when his job, that he works hard at, doesn't pay enough to feed them, him, and his wife?"

"So you're saying that the only ones who are evil are the ones who do evil things?" Bole mustered out around his potatoes.

"No," Harry shook his head, "I'm saying that we can't call dark evil and light good just because. You have to weigh the circumstances. In the case of the wizard that made me an orphan, I, personally, call him evil. He kills because he can, tortures because he can, and does nothing for others without demanding something in return first."

"How does this apply to us?" Flint reiterated.

"Do you want to be seen as evil just because you're dark?" Harry asked.

"It sounds to me more like you're trying to make us light," Bletchley grumbled.

"Nah." Harry grinned. "Just grey. I can't say that it's better to have all light around, or no one can appreciate the dark. Just like you can't have it all dark, or no one can appreciate the light. Both are needed. The hard part is for each extreme to understand each other, that's what the middle ground is for."

"Did you dream all this up yourself?" Flint raised an eyebrow.

"No," Harry laughed, "I picked up part of it from those older kids in Surrey, some of it from the books I read before coming to the school. Some of it came from conversations with the Weasley twins, and the parts I can explain the best are the ones I understood best. I mean, why would grey exist unless it was meant to bridge black and white, so that the other two could reach each other?"

"So you think we're being too dark," Derrick grumbled through his broccoli.

"I'm not necessarily saying that is the reason why you guys should play more honestly," Harry hedged, "I'm saying it at least in part because I'd like to see you guys who want to play professionally actually make it. I lived the first years of my life with people determined to believe that whatever went wrong was my fault. That's happening here with Slytherin. I want to help make them open their eyes. I want them to stop trying to pull the splinter from our eyes when they still need to pull the logs from theirs."

"Pull slivers?" the older boys were befuddled, and Malfoy voiced the confusion.

"Er," Harry rubbed his chin, "It's a Muggle phrase, kind of like those who live in glass houses shouldn't cast stones."

"I think I understand the principle of it," Warrington paused, "but Muggles have a weird way of saying things."

"Nah, they only say it like that when they want to sound really smart," Harry shrugged, "Elsewise they say it more like mow your own lawn before trying to tell me how to mow mine."

"Potter," Flint laughed, "stop trying to explain the metaphors, they're only getting more complicated."

"Okay," Harry looked around, "But does it make more sense why I keep getting on people's cases about falling to their expectations of us?"

"It does now." The others grinned. "When you put it like that."

Bletchley shook his head, "'Falling to their expectations,' I like that."

Harry realized he was full, "I have homework to finish now. I wound up being dragged onto the Quidditch pitch a while ago, so I didn't get my assignments done as early as I would have liked."

"Go on, Potter," Flint waved the small boy off, "We're going to drag you with us the next time we practice, so you can see how good we really are. And so we can get you trained to work with us, and us with you."

I just need to know if there is more description needed, or if I'm gasp too descriptive. Comma check would be nice, but is not mandatory. My computer has a rudimentary grammar check, so any other fine-tuning in that department would be nice. As well as typos. Hate those.

Okay, now don't shoot me for her presence, but Seelie is whom I dreamt up to fill in the Seeker slot. I don't know enough of the Gryffindors outside of Harry's main circle to have thought of a better alternative. If this scares you away, stop reading after this chapter, I'm sure she'll show up again at some point or another, but from

where I've written, the next earliest she'll show is chapter thirteen. She's an OC, and the closest to a self-insert that I hope to ever work with. Of course, that said, I hope to keep her from Mary Sue-ing. Hence the mixing up of words problem. It is true though, pretty much everything I wrote about her. Though if I'd had my druthers, I'd have placed her in Ravenclaw outright, or Slytherin even. Meh.

Uploading this as is. When kind Spider Lily gets the revised version to me, I'll run through it again and fix it. I just didn't want to keep everyone waiting. Hopefully there won't be too many changes, though I do owe her a great deal of thanks. I learned there's a reason I'm not an English Major.

To Harry, it seemed like he had only blinked after the Halloween incident when it was suddenly frigid and blustery outdoors, rather than the usual cool and damp. His discussions with the Slytherins had netted him an opportunity to watch the team practice, and he found himself pleasantly impressed with how well the team played outside of the actual competitions. The more the team worked, the more the first year hoped his plan would work. It would be a shame to know the boys- the Slytherin team was all males- in green and silver could play a great game without the tricks and subterfuge, only to have them resort to old ways as soon as the games became a challenge.

Feeling he might be biased, Harry got the feeling that the team was actually looking forward to showing the rest of the school that they could play honest. The new training took place for the main team, the tiny teams that acted as the reserves, and even for Harry, who was roughly the equivalent to a back up or reserve Seeker. The practices not only showed the students how to carry out their roles on the team; they also emphasized teamwork and strategies. Harry could only hope it would be enough. Ironically, between practices and the prank set ups he was working on with the twins, Harry had filled his time up enough that he was starting to regret getting involved in so much.

One day, during lunch, Professor Snape made the rounds of the Slytherin table, with a sheet of paper, taking names. As he reached Harry, the boy couldn't help but ask what the list was for.

"I'm writing down the students of my House who will be spending the winter holiday here at Hogwarts." The Potions Master stopped walking as Harry asked his question.

"Do we have to have permission from anyone to stay?" Harry tried to keep from giving away how much he was looking forward to the holidays at Hogwarts.

"Most of the parents will have already sent word to their children if their return was mandatory, Mister Potter," Snape looked at the list, "A note was already sent to the Dursleys regarding this, and we've not had a response."

"Please put my name on the list to stay sir," Harry wasn't sure he wanted everyone to know why he wanted to stay. But he was certainly of a mind that the less time with the Dursleys the better, "I think they would have said something by now, if they wanted me to return to Surrey."

"That was my assumption as well," Snape smirked. "Your name has more or less been on the list from the beginning of the year, but it is now official."

"Thank you sir." Harry went back to eating, and the professor continued down the line of the table. After a short bit, Harry realized no one else surrounding him was eating, "What?"

"Potter," Malfoy rolled his eyes, "In this House, it's an insult to have your name on the list."

"I'm used to those," Harry absent-mindedly muttered as he took a gulp of pumpkin juice, "Then again, if you knew the Dursleys, you might not see it as such an insult. After all, they are Muggles, remember?"

"So are these the sort of Muggles it's okay for us to disdain?" Nott raised an eyebrow.

"They are in my opinion," Harry grinned. "But you would have to get to know them to be able to make that decision. After all, I'm still trying to get you guys to think for yourselves."

"Potter," Flint was grinning, "How much of this is trying to get us to think for ourselves, and how much of this is a great crusade to white out the black upon our souls?"

The rest of the table was puzzled when Harry burst out laughing at Flint's remark. They didn't quite understand the reason why Harry thought 'white out' was so funny when he tried to explain it either, but finally Harry stood and left the table. He was going to meet the twins to put some finishing touches on the prank they wanted to pull before the break, but he told his Housemates differently.

"I'm going to the library to study a little before class," Harry muttered as he wandered off, books in hand, and supplies hoisted onto his shoulder in the bag that carried them.

Indistinct muttering met his ears, and Harry knew that even if they didn't believe it, they were going along with it. After all, the only Slytherin who was reliably pranked was Malfoy, and the rest of the House, though they kept this within the walls of the Common Room, found this quite funny. After all, he was the only one who verbally argued with Harry about blanket-hating Muggles. The rest just kept those thoughts to themselves. Of course, they also kept Malfoy from hearing about their reactions, but it was the thought that counted in Harry's mind. The main thing the pranks had done was to discourage out and out fighting between the Gryffindors and the Slytherins for much of the year. Each House knew that to be too loud about their distaste for the other was to invite a rash of pranks. Though he still got pranked, even Ron knew that smarting off was dangerous. It showed that while the redhead was intelligent enough to realize what caused his misfortune, he wasn't quite bright enough to fix it on his end.

When he reached the headquarters room, Harry spouted off the new password ("Toaster") and walked inside. During their research, the trio had found a spell that was used to change passwords. It was only capable of modifying the weakest of password settings, but that was still strong enough for the door to the side of the kitchens painting. So far, they'd been using Muggle kitchen implements in honor of the facilities next to their base. Sometimes, Harry suspected that someone had found the book for them and had left the book for them to find, but he wasn't bringing that into conversation until he had proof one way or the other.

"Hello, Harry," Fred- or so Harry thought it was- greeted without looking up.

"Hello." Harry stepped further into the room, and set his bag down. He began digging through it and found the notes he'd been looking for. He pulled them from the bag as the door opened again, and Harry had to quickly revise his guess of twins earlier. The one who had just walked in was Fred, and he'd already greeted George, so

Harry smirked and said, "Hey, Fred, did you know anything about the list they make before winter holidays?"

Nodding as he walked further into the room, Fred dug out his own set of notes, and replied, "Yeah. They do that every year. Most years, Mum's already told us we're to come home, but this year, she said we were staying. She, dad, and Ginny will be going to visit Charlie in Romania, while they can. They don't want either of us anywhere near a dragon, so we're not allowed to go."

"And Percy and Ron are just about enough to get strangled by the dragon handlers, so they can't either." George stood with his set of notes, and the three began comparing them quickly. When they had worked out their prank, the conversation turned to plotting new ones for during the break itself. Suddenly a honking noise sounded in the room and all three scrambled for their supplies to their next classes.

Outside the headquarters, Harry took the shortcuts he'd learned from the twins to get up to Transfiguration as quickly as possible. He was still rather disappointed with McGonagall's favoritism towards Granger, but as Granger was obviously also disturbed by it, he wasn't going to hold it against the girl. As he mused on this, Harry passed a low, growled conversation between Professor Snape and some unfortunate that happened to be on his bad side.

"You haven't figured out how to get past the dog yet, have you?" Snape snarled.

Indistinct muttering met Harry's ears as he continued on, trying to listen, and not to be late to class. The response to the muttering was another growled remark. "You don't want to get on my bad side, Quirrell, just remember that."

Having identified the other speaker, Harry blinked and rushed to class. He sat quickly, and pulled paper out to take notes with. He thought about puzzling the event out during class, but he knew that McGonagall would call on him, just to 'make things fair' in class, even though getting a right answer would only get a pursed mouth, and a clipped, 'correct, Mister Potter' from the witch.

Shoving that thought to the back of his mind, and the discussion between Snape and Quirrell to another pocket, Harry focused on class. He took notes on the assignment they would cover in class, and found himself intrigued. They were still working with inanimate objects, but they were now changing things like teacups into teapots. Something small to something quite a bit larger. Harry supposed that it was best to stick with things of a similar nature at first, but didn't get his hope up too much. After all, his studies with the twins were to the point that they were transfiguring pincushions into hedgehogs, and Harry had managed a passable job of it. His hedgehog wouldn't uncurl, but one couldn't pull its spines out either. So while he wasn't exactly bored, Harry actually finished making a teapot from a teacup at about the same time as Granger. He was quite unsurprised however when McGonagall made a big deal of the girl's job, praising it as spot on, done quite quickly, and being first.

He was flabbergasted though when the Gryffindor brunette piped up to the Transfigurations Mistress that Harry had completed his at nearly the same time, if not just a bit sooner, and his looked to be quite well done also. Grudgingly, the older woman walked to Harry's desk and peered at his teapot.

"Good job, Mister Potter," the grudging respect slowly blossomed into actual interest, as the woman noticed that Harry had kept the pattern on the china the same, but had changed the color. The handle was thicker on the pot than it had been on the cup, as it should be, and it was more sturdily connected. The lid was removable as it should have been, and the spout was fully open. "A point to Slytherin for varying the color of the pattern, even Miss Granger kept her pattern the same exactly."

Though they didn't show it, the Slytherin side of the room was also shocked. Not only had a Gryffindor stood up for one of them, but the instructor had actually complimented one of their own over a Gryffindor. Mentally, Harry decided to ask the girl if it had anything to do with the 'wizard's debt' she thought she owed him. He'd researched it, and found that only the wizard it was owed to could activate it, but that the wizard owing could still feel the need to fulfill it regardless. Granger had spent the last several weeks doing this sort of thing in classes, when it applied. He then thought about giving her

another chance to become a Junior Marauder, as the girl was a veritable bookworm, and he'd heard she had a knack for finding the exact details needed in books within short minutes of starting her search.

After the class ended, Harry quickly dropped a note in the direction of Granger's things, and left the room. He dashed back to the room beside the pear, and dropped off his bag. The twins were already there, and he quickly summarized the class he'd just left and ended with, "Do you think we should try again with her, see if she's relaxed on the rules a little by now?"

"Why do you want her help so much?" George raised an eyebrow.

"Not that we're against it, Harry," Fred quickly added, "but we're curious."

"The biggest reason is that she's wicked brilliant," Harry listed off, ticking them on his fingers as he went, "but she's also rumored to be able to find anything in any book within minutes. She might be able to help us figure out what that three-headed dog is guarding. Speaking of which, someone's trying to solve how to get past it."

"Really?" Fred perked up, "How'd you know that?"

"On my way to class, I overheard Snape snarling at Quirrell about it," Harry was distracted and didn't notice the look that passed between the twins, though his attention snapped back to them with the next question.

"Does that mean Snape's got Quirrell doing the hard work for him as he tries to get whatever's being guarded for himself?" George asked.

Harry shook his head. "We can't assume that. I talk with Professor Snape often enough that I can tell when he's asking questions he doesn't know the answer to, and it seemed like that today."

"So he was asking Quirrell, right?" Fred reminded himself.

"Which means he could suspect Quirrell's after whatever it is," George added.

"In which case," the twins tennis-matched the rest of what they had to say, "We should just leave it to Snape. Quirrell is terrified of the man. If Snape doesn't want the thing found, Quirrell will never get past him."

"We can only hope." Harry shrugged. "Besides, we still need to know what it is the dog's guarding."

"We should try Hagrid," Fred suggested. "If it's big, ugly, dangerous, and messy-

"-Hagrid either brought it in," George finished, "raised it, or both. He spends a lot of time in the Forbidden Forest, after all, and doesn't seem to think any of the creatures there are all that dangerous. Besides, he's liable to let things slip. He's a nice enough guy, but doesn't seem like the lights are on upstairs."

With that, the trio risked missing supper for a trip to Hagrid's hut. Harry had been to the hut once or twice, as the huge man had invited Harry for conversations, but the small boy wasn't exactly a fan of the place. He appreciated Hagrid's friendship, but he wasn't so fond of the man's insistence that Slytherins were evil, 'except Harry, of course.' Since the twins refused to prank him, citing he was good at returning pranks, Harry had never done anything about it except distance himself, but this one time, the boy had no choice but to interact with the bearded man and his strange dog.

"Good day, 'arry, Fred, George," they were greeted at the door. "What brings you three here, eh?"

"We were wondering-" Fred began. The three had decided to be as blunt as possible, to keep confusion levels down.

"-if you knew anything about the corridor on the third floor-" George continued. They had also decided to three-person tennis-match the conversation to keep Hagrid from getting mad at any one of them.

"-since I accidentally wound up there once," Harry finished, "and found a giant, three-headed dog that tried to eat me."

"Aw Fluffy wouldn't do that," Hagrid responded without thinking, "'e's harmless. Why, he probably thought you was jes' going to play with him. 'E wouldn't hurt no one. Why you jes' play him a pretty song an 'e's harmle- wait, I shouln't say tha'"

On a whim, Harry posed the next question, breaking the pattern slightly. "So, Fluffy's guarding that thing you took from vault seven thirteen, right?"

"Don't you worry about tha', Harry," Hagrid tried to reassure the boy, "it ain't jes' protected by Fluffy, alla the Professors have pitched in with protections, from- wait, shouln't say that either."

"What else shouldn't you say?" Fred couldn't resist picking on the man just a little.

"All right you three," Hagrid seemed to snap to attention. "You shouldn't worry about it. Headmaster Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel know how safe the school is, and they trust the professors to protect the- wait, can't say tha' either. Aw, quit askin' me questions I can't answer. Yer missin' supper now, boys, you oughtta get on to the Great Hall."

With that, he shooed the boys out of his hut, and Fang whimpered, covering his head with his paws. Harry took it as a sign that they'd gotten all the information they were going to from either of the two, and he let Fred and George lead the way to the Great Hall.

"So we got it confirmed that the dog is guarding something," Fred muttered.

"We almost know what it is," George continued, "and that Nicholas Flamel has something to do with it."

"We also know that the professors all have a hand in protecting it," Harry added, "but that means that at least one of the protections is broken already, with Quirrell and, or Snape out to solve the puzzles."

"So we just have to figure out what it is they're all protecting," Fred shrugged.

"I don't remember any mentions of a Nicholas Flamel in any of my books, guys." Harry countered. "Do you remember him from your History of Magic classes?"

"We wouldn't, Harry," the twins grinned sheepishly, "we still fall asleep in that class, so we don't have any notes from it."

"Oh," Harry pined a bit, "That's okay, I fall asleep in there too. I just focus on working on the readings and such with a study group."

"Now I can see where Hermione would be useful," Fred groaned.

"Well," Harry smirked, "you two can work on her, see if you can get her to help, and I'll see about using my sources."

With that, the three split up in the door of the Great Hall, and went their separate ways. Over the next several days, they would spend a great deal of time searching the books in the library, and all of their notes. Eventually, they recruited Granger's assistance, as Harry finally had a chance to discuss the 'wizard's debt' with her, and found that she was willing to help with the pranks. Even she was getting sorely tired of the single-minded hatred of Slytherins that prevailed in her dorms, thanks to Ron. While all of the Slytherins she'd met so far were at the least polite, Malfoy not included.

Even with the bookworm's help, the search for information on Nicholas Flamel met with no luck. They'd nearly exhausted the library during their search, having only left out the Restricted Section and those sections that covered magical creatures. Finally, Harry decided to make use of the last source he hadn't tried for information, and warned the others that he was going to ask Professor Snape for either some information on Flamel, or for a pass into the Restricted Section, so Harry could do a side paper on Alchemy. With the expressions on their faces, Harry felt he had to explain himself. He told them that while they'd searched, they had found books that indicated that Alchemy had been a precursor to Potions, and that

because of its mercurial nature, most books on the subject were restricted use only. Harry wanted to write a paper about it, knowing that the only way he'd get to read the books would be to promise a paper on what he found. He'd use that as an excuse to get into that part of the library so he could possibly collect other books.

With that bit of knowledge, Hermione was intrigued, and seemed about to threaten to write a paper of her own, but Harry reminded her that Professor Snape wasn't on as good of terms with her as with Harry. With that, Hermione backed down and agreed Harry would be best for finding the books. She did, however, demand to see Harry's notes, so that she could glean nuggets of knowledge from them herself. Shrugging, Harry warned her that no matter what he did, his writing was like chicken scratch.

Harry would have thought that finding his Head of House to ask a simple question would be easy, but for the rest of the term before the Winter Break, the professor was simply impossible to approach. Either older students surrounded the man, or he was surrounded by other professors, and Harry wasn't chancing others hearing his conversation with the man. On the one hand, Harry wanted to learn as much as he could about Mister Flamel and what he had been famous for. On the other though, Harry felt they would be in better health if they left things alone. After all, it seemed like the adults were doing a mighty good job to Harry.

As he was leaving Potions class one day, Harry tried once again to speak with his Head of House, but the man was briskly walking out of the classroom to the halls, as it appeared he was on Hall Monitor duty. Or something like that. Sighing, the small boy thought seriously about giving up on the quest when he happened across a sheet of paper on Professor Snape's desk.

Reading it off under his breath, Harry did what he could to commit it to memory at the same time. The information on it only made Harry believe more that Quirrell was after the object, in Harry's mind. After all, it listed Quirrell's contribution to the protections as being a troll, with a special comment to the effect that Quirrell was quite adept at handling said creatures. Here he laughed loudly because the irony of the Defense teacher's flight on the night of Halloween, then he

wondered what in the world that paper was doing on top of a Professor's desk where just anyone could pass by and read it, so he scanned it again. It seemed to him as though it was mixed in with papers from the Headmaster and the Deputy Headmistress, which made Harry wonder just how much Dumbledore knew about Quirrell. Snape called back into his classroom for the stragglers to leave, as lunch was in the Great Hall, not his classroom, and Harry skittered out, pondering what he'd found. He was so distracted he didn't even stop to pester the Potions Master yet again about needing to speak to him.

I have posted on deviantart, a new picture to thank all for 100 reviews. Look for toranekohybrid on the site, if you're looking at all. Oh, and how do you all feel about thestrals? I feel like I'm missing something, but I can't for the life of me figure out what...

As far as Hagrid and the paper go, I'm sorry if they seem too convenient to anyone, but Hagrid really was easy to get information from, I just stepped it up even more, sort of for humor's sake, but also because I didn't want to quote the actual conversation that happened. The paper is the contribution of another individual whom you'll see a bit of later... much later. So please, don't just tell me those factoids were too easy, tell me how to make them seem less so if you feel they were. Please?

When the holidays finally rolled around, Harry relaxed just a little. He no longer had the constant trade of skills to get information, the competition for reading material, for space in the halls, or even for time on the brooms in the Pitch. He even let this knowledge distract him for a day during the week, and kept the twins on their own borrowed brooms for the better part of it, to play a quick game of Broom Tag.

They were lacking a Hermione searcher, because the girl had gone back to her parents, and was enjoying her holiday. In the Hogsmeade weekend just before the term ended, Harry had given the twins a list, and what he had hoped was enough Sickles and Knuts to buy it all, and had been pleasantly surprised when they came back with almost half of it still. He'd quickly and quietly wrapped each individual item, and at the end of term, sent off the gifts that needed sending. He'd also found the house elves and asked how to distribute gifts to people still in the school.

The second day of the holiday, it was nose back to the grindstone, as the trio continued to search for information on Flamel, bitterly missing the Gryffindor girl's knack for cataloguing books. Harry was still working on a chance to speak with Professor Snape, and was still finding the man unusually impossible to approach. He was always either shadowing students, shadowing Quirrell, or so grumpy that Harry wasn't about to take the chance. Suspecting that the man wasn't getting much sleep, Harry resolved to try just before Christmas day itself, so he could give the gift he'd gotten for his Professor. He'd wondered exactly what to get each professor, as he didn't know any of them very well, but finally settled on gifts that seemed to go with the personality of the person in question. He and the twins had picked out a package of catnip as a prank gift to McGonagall, and Harry's serious gift had been lens cleaner for the woman's glasses. It had seemed to him that her container for it sitting on her desk was getting a little low. Sprout got a couple packages of flowers that would serve well in a Muggle garden, because Harry thought she might have both kinds of garden at home. Professor Flitwick got a stepladder Harry had put together from several small poles and boards he'd gotten the twins to purchase, and Harry had gotten the twins to look through the Muggle Studies section of the bookstore in Hogsmeade to find chemistry and other Muggle science texts if they could. When they

came back and said those books were there, Harry resolved to chase one down for professor Snape. If nothing else, it would make good kindling. Harry hoped that it would give the man new ideas for potions.

The day in question, Harry returned from breakfast, and wandered back to the professor's office, and rather timidly knocked on the door. After a bit of silence, steps sounded, and the door opened.

"Mister Potter," Snape stepped back to allow the child into the room, "I have noticed you trying to speak with me about something. I would apologize for being so unapproachable, but it's not my job to babysit all students at all times."

Pausing, as it seemed Harry hadn't managed to catch the man on a good day after all, Harry reached into his carrying case, and pulled the gift he'd gotten for his Head of House, "Sorry I gave you that impression, sir. I just wanted to ask you a couple questions I didn't think any students would know the answer to, and to give you this."

Taking the wrapped package, Snape peered at it, muttering. Harry realized after a start, that the man was checking it for hexes and curses. He supposed he wouldn't call it an insult, as Harry was one of the Junior Marauders. When the man stopped spell casting, he looked up, "What is this?"

"It's a gift sir," Harry was smirking internally at the chance to smart off.

"Why," Snape drawled, "would you give me anything, Potter?"

"Mostly as a thank you for not treating me as my father's son," Harry shrugged, "I probably do act like him at times, as I've heard other professors mutter about it, but you've managed to keep treating me like an individual. I appreciate it, and the time you've taken to explain things in Potions for me."

"You can cease buttering me up, child," Snape shook his head and focused on the small boy again, "What is your real reason for venturing to my office during the holidays?"

"Well, that was a real reason," Harry shook his head, "But it wasn't my only reason. I've been digging around the library with the twins and we'd found books that mentioned a Nicholas Flamel. They just mention him, and pass on to something else. But I wanted to know what he did. He obviously did something important, to be mentioned in-"

"He's not mentioned in any books in Hogwarts' library," Snape interrupted, "More likely than not you were speaking with Hagrid and he let slip something to do with the man."

"Urm," Harry blinked.

"What reason would a Potter have for wanting to know more about an Alchemist? Much less the one who is called the 'godfather' of Potions?" the professor pondered to himself.

Harry wanted to jump for joy, as not only was he getting a clue about Flamel, but also the man tied into Alchemy, which he was genuinely curious about. He wanted to interrogate Snape, but he knew there was no faster way to shut down the conversation than to do that, "Sir? He was an alchemist? That's great because I'd read mentions of Alchemy in some of the Potions texts and was curious about the subject."

"Again, Mister Potter," Snape leaned forward, "Why do you want to know about Alchemy?"

"I know you'll find this hard to believe, sir," Harry began, "but I don't do well in Potions just because I want to be able to ask you endless questions. I actually kind of enjoy it. I didn't get that far in school, but it sounds like Muggle chemistry would be similar to Potions, and it's also kind of close to cooking, which I did kind of enjoy back in Surrey."

"You're right, I do find it hard to believe you actually enjoy Potions," Snape shook his head, "That's at least in part due to the fact that there's never been a Potter who did enjoy it, to my knowledge."

"Did my mother?" Harry was questing for information about his mother, and for a possible excuse as to why he liked Potions.

"Actually, yes," this made the professor pause, "Fine. That explains your interest in Potions and Alchemy even, but it does not explain why you were searching through three-fourths of the library."

This gave Harry pause. He hadn't known that anyone would keep track of the books they had been looking through. He then supposed that since they had started with history texts, he could go with the cover story the quartet had cooked up, "Fred and George got assigned a research assignment for History. Since McGonagall caught them slacking in class that one time and assigned it," which had actually happened, "and when they came back with the texts, I naturally started snooping. We ran across the one reference to Mr. Flamel, and couldn't find any others. They've got their paper written and everything, we just decided to search for more information on the man, in case we could use it in another assignment."

"You mean prank," Snape smirked at Harry's expression. Then the man reached over to a drawer in his desk, "Fine, if you want information on Flamel's contribution to history, I will help. The twins will turn in a copy of this history paper to me, and you will write about Flamel, his contribution to Alchemy, and why he is called the godfather of Potions. I'll even accept one from Miss Granger, as long as she doesn't blather for more than twelve inches past what you write."

Harry's eyes felt like they should be popping out of his head, he was so surprised that not only was the professor giving him a pass into the Restricted section, he was also listing the exact books to look up. Harry wondered if this had to do with the thing Fluffy was guarding, but he wasn't sure what to make of it, "Sir? Not that I'm ungrateful or anything, but why are you so...?"

Smirking some more, Snape passed the paper along to the boy, then stood, "Because I know that you would find a way to get into that section of the library anyway. This way, I know you're in there, when, and what you're looking for. I will also have a better sense of what you've gleaned from your search. Besides, there are so few

interested in Potions anymore, who am I to block the search of another?"

Harry began to get suspicious, "Sir, that sounds, if you'll pardon my saying, like a load of, well, junk."

Harry didn't know whether he wanted to run and hide or if the man was actually going to give him points. He'd had that expression before for both occasions. As he led the boy from his office, Snape explained, "If you can actually write a coherent paper on Flamel and Alchemy, I won't give you a detention for snooping into things that are none of your business. If the twins can write a decent paper on Magic History in general, I won't subtract points from Gryffindor and give them detention for not only worming out of actual class, but for also sticking their noses where they don't belong. And if you can keep Miss Granger from submitting a thesis on both subjects, I won't subtract points and give her a detention for being a know-it-all who has to show it."

Groaning, Harry said aloud, "I should have left them to the assignment for themselves."

"Exactly," came the drawled response, "Now, good day Mister Potter."

Beginning to feel that this particular form of travel was being labeled as a 'Harry Potter scuttle,' the boy scuttled to Junior Marauder Central, as the password was now, and slipped inside. He beelined for what he thought was the comfiest chair, and pulled the note back out of his pocket, to read the titles he'd been cleared for in the library.

"Well, mate," over his left shoulder, a twin stood, "I take it you buffaloed the bat?"

"Oh no," Harry paled, "Not even close. He just made it clear he wants copies of those fake papers I had you two write up to cover our skins. He also wants me to write one on Potions, Flamel and Alchemy. And one from Granger too."

"Wait a-", Fred paled to match the brunet, "We wrote basic stuff in there."

"How long do we have?" George dug through the pile of paperwork to find the dummy drafts.

"The first day back from holidays," Harry read off the note, "according to this."

"Well, at least we have time," Fred shrugged, and pulled notes from scattered places, "Time to revise."

"Good thing we have the prank for tomorrow already set up," George sighed and dug out his own notes, "We'd never have time for both otherwise."

"We'll need to send an owl to Granger though," Harry mumbled, "With all kinds of notes on it, to warn her," he looked up at the twins, "because she's supposed to turn one in too, you know."

"Yeah," Fred muttered distractedly, "We heard you the first time."

"That means we need to hurry up and do this other research," Harry interrupted the twins, "so the information is even there to write about."

"Eh," George stood reluctantly, gathering the research supplies, "What are our consequences?"

"Detentions for all four of us," Harry rubbed the side of his head, "And Gryffindor point loss for you three. Other than that, he wasn't specific."

"Eurgh," the twins chorused.

"Oh," Harry paled yet again, "And you'll have to turn those in to McGonagall after all."

"Double Eurgh," Fred grumbled.

"We'd all but convinced her to leave off on it," George whimpered, "So much for that idea."

With that, the three boys ventured into the library, where Harry walked right up to Madam Pince's desk and met the disapproving frown with the note from Professor Snape, "Sorry ma'am, but Professor Snape caught me snooping in his office, and set me a paper about Potions and Alchemy."

Taking the note, and reading it, the librarian nodded, "Fine then, I'll go into the section and collect the books for you. Wouldn't want you to snoop in there either, Mister Potter."

When she returned, the boys had set up camp at a table. She set the books down at the table and asked for Harry's wand, "Wouldn't want you to forget to return them either, now would we?"

While Harry skimmed and scanned, and read the rather dauntingly large Potions text and Alchemy tome, the twins were frantically rewriting their 'History' paper. They knew they'd need to write it loads better to meet Snape's standards. By the time Harry finished reading and jotting notes, his hands were cramped like mad, and the twins were poking each other in the ribs to prevent themselves from falling asleep.

"Done now?" Fred rubbed his eyes.

"We are," George was muffled, as his head was resting on the table.

"Near as can be," Harry gently closed the books, and moved to take them up to Madam Pince.

"Wait," George peered around the area.

"She's not looking," Fred grinned, and pulled a sheaf of paper out of his pouch, setting it on the desk, "We've tested this before on other Restricted books, so we should be okay with this. We might lose a few words here and there, but we'll have our own copies."

With that, one twin tapped on the sheaf of blank pages, and the other on the first book. They muttered a spell, and roughly half of the pages moved to rest next to the rest of the pile. The process was repeated with the other book, and that left the three boys with a tall stack of loose-leaf pages copied from the two tomes. Harry carried the books up to the librarian's desk as the twins shuffled all of the papers back into bags.

"Thank you ma'am," Harry nodded as the librarian took the books and passed back his wand. Then he met the twins on the way out, and took his third of the things they'd brought into the library and headed back for their secret room.

They spent much of the rest of the day organizing the notes, and revising the twins' papers. Once they had that done, Harry finished his notes, and asked the twins to recopy them. Granger constantly griped about having to read Harry's writing, even though he always warned her about his script being cramped, so he wanted to stave off her grumping. When the notes were copied in a more legible manner, Harry penned a note. Amazingly his cursive was more readable than his manuscript, but he wasn't about to write class notes that way. The note told the girl what Snape had said, and threatened, and that she needed to tell him how long her paper was, so he could make sure his was nearly the same length. He only hoped that she didn't write that thesis that Professor Snape was worried about.

With the preparations for papers complete, the three boys proceeded to put the last details for their prank in place. It would take place, in full glory, or 'technicolor glory' as Harry called it, the day that the rest of the students came back, but small things would need to be placed first, so that they could lessen their chances of being caught. By the time the boys all returned to their respective Common Rooms, the initial layering of pieces for the prank were in place. They just had to wait until the same time the next night to place the second level.

After reaching Slytherin Common Room, Harry peered around, suspicious of being snuck up on by his Head of House, but relaxed after a bit when he encountered no one. He settled into one of the cushioned chairs near the fireplace, and started further organizing his notes. When he had that finished, he dug out a section of the text the

twins had copied for him, and he began reading it to glean more from it. The notes he'd sent a copy of to Granger were purposely brief, to hopefully prevent her from writing more than ten feet of text. Harry hoped he hadn't given her more than that amount, but knowing her, she'd have access to a plethora of books to supplement her writing with. He could only hope that it wasn't enough to put her more than a foot past what he wrote.

When he realized he was spending more time yawning than writing, Harry deemed it time to go to bed. At about that time, the only other Slytherin still at Hogwarts stumbled through the portrait. Harry wasn't sure what to make of Bletchley staying at the school for the break, but it didn't seem to him to be anything good for the smaller boy. Part of Harry's mind told him that the others of his House had decided someone needed to stay behind for the first year, but Harry couldn't figure out what they'd get from it. And as Harry hadn't seen the older boy thus far during the break, he couldn't ask his fellow Slytherin any questions regarding the situation.

Taking a chance, Harry stood and met the older boy in the middle of the Common Room, "Bletchley, I wanted to know if you were here for any particular reason, say, to keep an eye on the first year Slytherin staying at the school this year?"

The older boy chuckled, and said, "Not in the way you think Potter. But yeah, I'm here to keep an eye on you. Rather to keep an eye out for you. There are Gryffindors staying all over the place, and not all of them are your pet Weasels. Some might want to hurt a Slytherin for being a Slytherin, regardless of his also being the Boy-Who-Lived."

Nodding, Harry grinned, "I rather hoped it was that reason, and not because you all thought the 'Boy-Who-Lived' was just waiting for the rest of the snakes to leave the nest so he could lay traps."

Harry knew he'd hit the nail on the other side of its head when the older boy flinched. Grinning, Harry made it clear that he'd known all along, but didn't care much.

"Potter, you're an odd one," Bletchely guided the smaller boy down the passage to the sleeping quarters of each year group, "How is it

you're so good at all your classes, and can pick up on such things so quickly?"

"As far as knowing that you all were trying to guard your own backs," Harry shrugged, "It's just as much a matter of I had to do that for myself for ages, so I know what to look for, as it is a case of intuition serving me well. The other, well, I'm good at classes because I am, I guess. I don't know why otherwise."

The taller Slytherin shook his head, turned back towards the older student rooms, and muttered, "At least you don't wonder why you're the Raven of Slytherin for your year."

"Aw," Harry mock pouted, "You mean I'm not the Raven of Slytherin for the whole House?"

Hearing the other snicker as he headed off, Harry turned to his own door, and walked through. When he was sure of Bletchley's departure, Harry cast a quick set of charms he'd found in one of the twins' books. They locked the door and would warm up a person's hand when touched, which would give him a little forewarning, if anyone attempted to force it. He'd take the spells off the door in the morning, but he wanted to be sure no one knew that he had the notes from the Alchemy text.

Working with the twins had only encouraged Harry's search for a spell that would prevent manipulation from occurring to his papers. So he'd dug up a charm that would require a password to change the information on the page. He'd used that, along with a blanket password to protect his assignments, and would mutter the password to the professors as he turned in the papers. Eventually, he hoped to be able to charm his assignments to look like something else, until he wanted them to appear as his assignments, to fully protect them, but even the twins didn't yet know how to do that. Meanwhile, Harry hadn't stopped working on his map. He was frustrated by the moving parts of the castle, but he figured that was a small price to pay.

As he wanted to wait until he'd completed it to make any trades for it, Harry hadn't revealed his progress to anyone else. Harry knew the older Slytherins would be willing to trade for even what he had now,

but Harry wanted the map to be more complete. He knew the twins had something that told them where everyone was, but Harry couldn't ever fathom what it was. He knew it had something to do with that paper he'd been tested for Marauder-ness with, and he suspected it had to do with a password as well, but he wasn't able to hear the password from either of the twins. He just knew they had some interesting traditions for each pranking session. After all, he couldn't think of any particular reason to solemnly swear to be up to no good as they left the base each night, as that was obvious. He knew they stared at something as they did so, but he couldn't tell if it was a folder, a sheaf, or a single page of paper.

I'll ask again, how do you all feel about Thestrals?

Oh, and don't be angry about about the spell the twins pulled out of their hats, there's a consequence/drawback to it. The three just don't know it yet. One quick change made to the chapter thanks to back-in-black22's comment on something I wrote on accident.

Waking up the next morning, Harry was rather surprised to see something at the foot of his bed. He was quite used to seeing his feet of course, but usually, the next thing at that line of vision was the end of Crabbe's bed, trunk, and curtains. Right now, Harry could barely see the bed, at his own feet. The objects blocking the way were what appeared to be boxes. They seemed harmless enough, but Harry was still more than just a little leery of them.

Feeling distinctly out of touch with his Slytherin side, Harry took a chance and snagged one off the pile. Rather than the expected names of his roommates, Harry saw his own. The particular box in his hands had been a collective gift from the Quidditch team, the note stated, and shrugging to himself, he carefully pulled the paper apart to reveal a book. Bemused, he read the title. 'Quidditch Rules of Our Time,' it stated. He got a puzzled look on his face and would have continued to ponder that gift, but for the muffled yelp at the door.

Smacking himself, Harry remembered the charm he'd cast on the door the night before. He was actually amazed it had lasted that long and vowed to look it up in the book again, to see what its duration was. Hurrying to the door, he pulled his wand to dispel it when it came flying open, nearly into his nose, with a muttered Ending Spell.

"Is it completely necessary, Mister Potter," Professor Snape stood behind Bletchley, who was nursing a lightly burnt hand, "to bespell your door to burn hands?"

"I never got much privacy back in Surrey," Harry tried to cover his tracks, "and privacy here is an imaginary seven-letter word. So, at the first chance, I wanted to protect what little I was going to get."

The older boy smirked, "You mean you have something you don't want to get caught possessing."

"Er," Harry paled.

"My guess is that Mister Potter attempted to make copies of books from the library," Snape drawled, "They'll last for a while, but there are charms on the books in the library to prevent just such a thing."

You might have long enough to recopy them by hand before you have nothing more than blank pages again."

Sighing, Harry resigned himself to another detention.

"I think I shall leave your punishment to Madam Pince," Snape smirked, "After all, it is her rule you broke."

"Yes sir," Harry released another sigh, "I'll subject myself to her justice when breakfast is over."

"Fist, Potter," Bletchley seemed excited, "You have to open your gifts. All of them."

"Isn't it an awful lot though?" Harry pointed at the pile at the foot of his bed, "You're sure that none belong to someone else?"

"Potter, please," Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose, "You may be used to getting just the gifts your relatives gave you, but now you're in the Wizarding world, you'll have to get used to the fact that more people will feel the need to gift you with things."

"I don't want to know why, do I, sir?" Harry peered up at the man.

"Not particularly, I would guess," Bletchley smirked, "Now go and open them, I want to see what everyone gave you."

Harry pulled the book he'd already revealed from the bedcovers, "Why exactly did the team give me this?"

"You're going on about us playing by the rules," the older boy smirked, "We figured we might as well have you learn every last one. That way, on the team or not, you can yell at Jordan when he praises his team for their rule-breaking while cursing at us for playing right."

"If they'll stoop that low, they really aren't any better than they claim we are," Harry muttered. He was sure he'd been heard, but neither of the older Slytherins said anything.

"So, next," Bletchely waved a hand at the pile.

Rolling his eyes, Harry reached for the next object. It was wrapped similarly to the one from the Quidditch team, only quite a bit neater. Heavy, and thick, Harry could almost smell the potions that had to have been brewing in the room with whoever bound the object, or at least wrapped it. Carefully peeling away the paper, and noting that it had come from the Professor, Harry uncovered another book. 'Common Recombinant Effects in Potions' sparked more interest than the Quidditch book had. As a book Harry hadn't gotten his little hands on, he wanted to sit and read it at once. The expressions on the other Slytherins' faces told him he'd telegraphed his reaction, and he pinked slightly.

"Thank you Professor," he managed not to squeak like a dog's chew toy, but only just barely.

"You saw fit to send me a chemistry text," the man shrugged, "I figured that if you were out to ensure I saw the commonalities between Potions and Chemistry, I'd make sure you know how various herbs and other ingredients affect each other in Potions."

"I figured you'd take better to a book on Chemistry than one on Cooking," Harry gently set the book beside the first gift, "Not that I'm saying anything about your cooking skills, sir."

Smirking, the man replied, "I'm perfectly capable of cooking for myself. A skill that the majority of this House needs to learn."

The worried expression on the older boy's face made Harry laugh. As the Potions Master turned to leave the room, Harry quickly dug into the rest of the gifts, and opened them. The next one he opened was squarish, lumpy, soft, and lovingly, yet unevenly wrapped. Puzzled, Harry held it up to the other boy's gaze for inspection, "What?"

"That's a Weasley special, if ever I saw one," the older boy smirked.

Harry began removing the paper off the lumpy gift, sparing the label only. He paused as he revealed a green sweater, knitted with thick wooly yarn, emblazoned with a rather large 'H' on the center of the

front in dark blue. Pausing, Harry peered at it more closely, and then shrugged.

"While we were waiting for you to wake up, the professor mentioned a paper you were supposed to turn in. You'd better not have forgotten to turn it in. He doesn't take late papers." Bletchley leaned against one of the other beds.

"I know," Harry began explaining the paper he was assigned, "I went to the professor for questions, and he decided that I should stop sticking my nose in other peoples' business. So I got to do the research, and the paper, but it has to meet certain standards or I'll get a detention."

"Unless you can write a NEWT level paper already," Bletchley blanched, "Count on getting the detention."

"I already was," Harry paused, "What's a NEWT?"

"Nearly Exhausting Wizarding Test," the other boy explained, "They're the tests seventh years go through at the end of the year, to prove they've learned what the ministry wants us to learn. Fifth years have OWLs, or Ordinary Wizarding Levels."

"Huh," Harry blinked, "So you've got studying for that on top of classes, and Quidditch, right?"

"Yeah," Bletchley groaned, "That's why I'm not too tickled with your, no cheating bits. The team didn't have to practice nearly as much before."

"That's okay and dandy for you," Harry cocked his head sideways, "But what about Flint, who wants to go professional? He'd only be able to get in with teams that cheat, and they never get very far anyway. He'd never make enough to support himself the way he really wants to. And don't forget that Higgs wants to go into the League as well. He's already been scouted by those teams, and he's not going to get any better offers because you guys wanted to wait until next year to unveil the cleaner play of Slytherin Quidditch."

"Not like it would have made any difference for him anyway," the Keeper snorted, "Those other teams don't look at Slytherins for recruiting unless we're exceptional, and he's not. He's good, don't get me wrong, but he'd make just as good a Chaser as he does Seeker, and that's not good enough to draw the attention of the majority of the teams."

"That's on the list of things we need to change when we're out of Hogwarts," Harry muttered to himself, "We need to prove that Slytherins are just like everyone else, that everyone else is just as capable of walking the wrong path, and that they need to quit looking at us like we're slime."

"Not like you'll ever have to worry about it, Potter," the older boy smirked, "You're the 'Boy-Who-Lived,' they'll never believe you could go dark. Or evil."

"You're not going to like hearing this," Harry prefaced, "but the Muggle world has their own versions of the newspapers, and there are some people who can start off as the precious 'do no wrong' sorts for them. It really doesn't take much for the Muggles to turn on their own."

"And you defend them?" Harry could tell that the older boy was infuriated.

"The same reason why I defend Slytherins," Harry met the older boys eyes squarely, "They're just as capable of making mistakes as any wizard. In fact, I doubt that there's much difference between a Muggle and a Wizard, aside from the magic we can use that they can't."

"I'll think on it Potter," the older boy shrugged, "But you might want to open your gifts, breakfast is fast approaching, and I'm not missing it just because you're marveling over your haul."

"Er," Harry stammered, "You're absolutely sure this whole pile is mine?"

"Should be," the other boy shrugged again, "Though I wouldn't be surprised if more showed up in the next couple of days."

Harry's eyes went wide again. He blinked, then shrugged, and turned to the pile. In his usual methodical manner, Harry revealed a book from Granger, titled 'Quidditch Through the Ages,' and grinned. The girl must have heard about his helping the Slytherin team. Various small gifts revealed themselves to be from other Slytherins. Small though they were, they showed that the Slytherin House truly did support their own, as most of them refilled his Potions supplies, and gave him new ingredients entirely. The rest provided him with more paper for class, and higher quality quills to take notes with, now that Harry was more confident in his writing with the tools. There were even a few cards from the Chocolate Frogs collection included, but the Frogs themselves were absent. Harry figured those had come from Crabbe and Goyle, and was happy they remembered not to leave the chocolate on the cards themselves before sending them. Even more, it made him glad he'd gotten gifts for the other students as well, though he needed to find a gift for the collective Quidditch team now.

The older boy snorted at the cards, "Getting your own collection added to, eh, Potter?"

"More like started, Bletchley," Harry looked up, "I've seen them, and even been given bits of the frogs, but I don't have any of the cards."

"What'd you give Crabbe and Goyle to get some of their collections?"

"I dug up a book to help one with his broken tooth causing problems with his spells," Harry sorted the gifts into piles, and put away the supplies he'd gotten, "And the other was to thank me for the cleaner written notes for History to study from."

"Potter," the older boy shook his head, with a grin, "You seemed to us older students, as though you'd been mis-sorted at first. Now I see you're settled in just fine, and its as though we're only just seeing the colors of your scales."

Harry grinned. He'd thought he'd understood the older students' hesitations right, but this confirmed it. He finished putting his gifts away, except for the sweater and the book from the Potions Master,

and headed for the Common Room. The other boy followed and the two quickly made their way to the Great Hall, where the four tables for students to sit and eat were decorated much as they had been for Halloween. Only everything was covered in a fine mist of white, looking like a light snowfall.

Harry spotted the twins, Ron, and Percy, all in their own instances of the sweater, and noticed that Ron's really didn't go well with his shock of red hair. Hearing Bletchley's snort, Harry looked at the older boy.

"The twins must have continued the tradition of shoving their older brother into his sweater," the older boy snickered under his breath. Harry then looked again at the oldest Weasley in the school, and blinked. The older boy had been trying to worm his arms through the sweater, and was failing to squirm them through the sleeves. He looked as though he had been tied up, and Harry had to bite his lip to keep from laughing as well. The twins weren't even trying not to laugh, and the youngest Weasley was turning odd colors as he looked at Harry.

"Urm," suddenly uncomfortable, Harry sat quickly, and started eating.

"I think the youngest Weasley's just flummoxed by your getting a sweater at all," the older boy reassured him. He'll either get over it or storm over to confront you about it," shrugging the older boy also dug into his breakfast, "that's how Gryffindors usually work."

"Hm," Harry distracted himself with his scrambled eggs and toast. When he'd finished eating, he stood and turned for the Prankster Headquarters. He mumbled to the older Slytherin that he was going to find a quiet place to read his new Potions book, and walked out of the Great Hall. By the time he'd reached the expanse of wall beside the painting leading to the kitchens, Harry knew he had someone following him. He stopped, turned and faced the youngest Weasley.

"Mum sent you a sweater," Ron's face had finally returned to a normal color, "So that means she's adopted you. I don't like Slytherins, but you're not bad for a Slytherin. I've even noticed that the Slytherins don't get nearly as cruel in what they say since you showed up, which makes me think you've got something to do with

that. I can't say as I like you, you've helped my brothers nail me with too many pranks, but I get the feeling that they only get me when I deserve them. Like when I start fights with Slytherins."

"And your point for all of this is?" Harry was honestly confused.

"Look," Ron rubbed at his forehead, "I can't promise to like you or any other Slytherin, but I'm going to try and ignore your being in that house, and treat you like I do the rest of my brothers, as my mum seems determined already to do that herself. So," the redhead paused, rubbed his hands on his pants, seeming to be warming them up, and held out his right hand, "peace, right? Or brothers, whichever you want to look at it as."

"Er," Harry tried to puzzle out what the redhead was up to, and had just about stretched out a hand to shake on it, when the twins barreled down the hall, laughing and making a ruckus.

Startled, the redhead pulled his hand back, and looked back at his brothers as they approached, "What?"

"Is ickle Ronniekins trying to make peace?" Fred teasingly wrapped an arm around his brother's shoulder, and squeezed.

"Putting our affairs in order, are we?" George continued.

"Uhm, er," Ron stuttered and stammered, "I was just, just,"

"What's going on?" Harry crossed his arms in front of him.

"Ickle Ronniekins threw a fit when he heard from us that mum was sending you a sweater," Fred started to explain.

"Then he had another fit when you came into the Great Hall just carrying it," George nodded, then grabbed the sweater from the brunet's hands and started bunching it up."

"Uh," Harry blinked madly, "Let me set my book down first, please. I didn't put it on because I wasn't sure I was supposed to."

Waiting for the younger boy to put the book down, George held the bunched sweater over his head, poised to swing it around the other's neck. When the book rested on the floor, the tall redhead wasted no time in putting the material over Harry's head, and scooping his arms through the sleeves. Harry was grateful that the older boy had given him that courtesy. Harry didn't want to think about how hard he'd have found trying to shove his arms through, the sweater was snug as it was. When the wool was pulled over his waist, Harry piped up, "So why would Ron be trying so actively to make peace?"

"Mum gets real grumpy when us brothers fight among one another," Ron mumbled, "So if she knew I was fighting with you, and was the start of it, she'd be all over me in no time flat."

"Ah," Harry nodded, "Okay, I suppose I can accept a truce. Just so long as you keep your eyes open about Slytherins. We aren't evil. We don't dance in the moonlight over a blood sacrifice of newborn lambs or anything like that. We just sit in the Common Room and do our homework, like any other Hogwarts student, I would expect."

The twins laughed as the younger redhead paled at the mention of sacrifices of lambs. When he calmed back down, Ron shook his head and muttered, "You have a strange sense of humor Potter, I have to tell you that."

"That's okay," Harry shrugged, "I haven't had much experience with Wizards in my life so far, so I'm still learning what is considered funny around here."

Shrugging, the youngest redhead turned and left, "I'm going back to the Common Room, and I'm going to eat the last of the Frogs. The cards will be all mine, and I might even get the Agrippa that I've been waiting for."

Waiting until Ron was gone, the trio turned to the wall just behind them, and in unison, chanted the password. As they stepped into the room, they panicked. Obviously someone had gotten into their headquarters, as there were three small packages on the tabletop. They scrambled around, making sure nothing was missing, and there were no spells cast on the room itself. When they settled, they looked

at the boxes. Casting another round of spells to make sure no tracking or listening spells were on them, and no pranks would activate, each boy picked up the box with his name on it. The twins had identical boxes, and Harry's was just a little bigger, but it was squishy, as the sweater package had been. He watched the twins unwrap theirs, which turned out to be a pair of books. Scanning the titles revealed them to be named, 'Marauder Journal,' and 'Marauder Spellbook.'

Harry tore into his own gift, and barely spotted the paper settled on the top of the silvery fabric before the twins gasped and crowded around him, "Wicked Harry. That's an invisibility cloak. They keep people from seeing you with their eyes. Too bad they aren't an infallible way to sneak around. They can be detected by the Marauder's Map. And there are people who specialize in a mental discipline that would allow them to sense your thoughts, even under the cloak."

"What's a Marauder's Map?" Harry latched on to the one statement the tennis match yielded him with enough to ask about.

"Oh, yeah," Fred acted sheepish, "We had meant to tell you earlier."

"But then again, not," George was just as sheepish, "We figured you wouldn't like hearing about it all."

"Okay," Harry drawled, sat down, and waited for the twins to either sit, tell the story, or do both.

"You see, we found this in Filch's office in our first year," Fred related, "We'd been caught, and were fidgeting like any nervous first year would with him, when we spotted this paper on his desk. We quickly made a distraction, whisked it off the desk, and carried it back to our Common Room."

"We could tell it had been dead useful to someone," George added, "but it was in a state that only told us it had been made by Moony, Padfoot, Prongs and Wormtail, we didn't know anything more than that."

"Then we found things that indicated that those four had gone by the name of Marauders," Fred continued, "and that the Marauders had been pranksters."

"We then set about discovering how to use the paper, and when we did," George finished, pulling the paper Harry had been inducted into Junior Marauder-ness with, "We came to call ourselves the Junior Marauders."

Looking at the paper, Harry was amazed as it formed letters, seemingly of its own accord. 'Mssr. Padfoot thinks that's a nice name to go by.'

'Mssr. Prongs agrees, but feels it could be a little more original.'

'Mssr. Moony thinks the Junior Marauders are almost ready to drop the Junior and become the second generation of Marauders in their own right.'

'Mssr. Wormtail would like to know if the Junior Marauders have managed to keep from being caught as often as Mssrs. Padfoot and Prongs did in school.'

'Mssr. Padfoot thinks Mssr. Wormtail is just digging for trouble.'

When the Harry looked up, he saw the twins grinning, and double blinked, "Did you know that that paper did that?"

"Sure," George smirked, "Why else do you think we sent you with it to make sure Ron and Perce got to see it?"

"Wow," Harry blinked, "But if you knew about this all along, why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Well," Fred hesitated, "We knew you'd be good for pranks, but we weren't sure you were quite ready for full Marauder Junior status."

"Then it just never came up," George shrugged, "Sorry, mate. Now you know."

"That would have been so useful earlier," Harry moaned, "I was working on a map for the Slytherins to use to get around."

Harry spotted letters rapidly appearing on the paper, and leaned over to read them.

'Mssr. Padfoot would like to know why a Junior Marauder would help a slimy, Slytherin git with anything.'

"I am a Slytherin, thanks," Harry glared at the paper.

'Mssr. Moony would like to tender his congratulations to the Junior Marauders for having more than one house involved in the fun.'

'Mssr. Wormtail thinks that the Slytherin Marauder must be a lion in Snake's skin, as the Slytherins would never have enough nerve for anything of Marauder level.'

Harry was too angry to respond. He saw now what the twins had meant by saying the Marauders had been biased. He began to think that perhaps half of the older group had actually been open-minded. This though was interrupted by the last Marauder adding his own comments to the conversation, 'Mssr. Prongs thinks that the Marauders is no place for a Slytherin, and that Moony has been affected by one too many moonbeams to make any sense.'

"You're just a bunch of egotistic jerks who wouldn't see past their own noses to the people under the title of 'Slytherin'!" Harry was furious, and tried not to shout, but still spoke loudly, "I can't believe you were anyone to look up to. It sounds to me like you're worse than the Slytherins ever were, what with your pranking them exclusively!"

'Mssr. Moony would like to remind the newest Marauder that Slytherins target Muggles and Muggle borns on a regular basis.'

"They do that out of ignorance," Harry growled, "And more than a little self defense. They've gotten the reputation for being evil, and no one ever bothered to look past it. Of course they're not going to be nice. Why bother when no one will let you live down what someone a generation or five ago did?"

'Mssr. Moony feels that the Slytherin Marauder should look at what he just said and realize that the Marauders also acted out of ignorance. No Slytherin ever tried to change what we knew.'

"Of course not, they didn't think it would do them any good," Harry calmed a little, "I want to fix that. I'm hoping that eventually the rest of the world will see that what someone five or fifty years ago did doesn't automatically reflect on the generations to come. There couldn't have been enough Slytherins to fuel Voldemort's needs, so he had to get other soldiers from somewhere, right? So why does everyone always say that only Slytherins went bad?"

'Mssr. Padfoot thinks that You-Know-Who would not have just recruited from England, and everyone knows that Durmstrang teaches the Dark Arts.'

'Mssr. Prongs feels that perhaps the little Snake is trying too hard to justify himself.'

'Mssr. Moony is willing to ponder the possibility of the angle the Slytherin Marauder has suggested.'

'Mssr. Wormtail feels that the first generation of Marauders has been jabbering long enough, and if the New Marauders would please activate the map, the conversation or argument, if you will, can end, and perhaps be restarted another day.'

Fuming at the Map, but still curious, Harry looked at the twins, who seemed as surprised as the Slytherin at the reaction Harry's comments had brought from the map, "Did you know it did that?"

"Sure, we knew you could talk to it," Fred blinked, and handed the map to Harry, "Just say to the paper, 'I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good.' It should activate the actual map part."

Muttering the phrase, Harry blinked as the paper changed from being smothered in the argument the Marauders were having amongst themselves, to a series of lines and dots. It finally resolved itself to be a map of the school, "Your opening line to pranks makes sense now."

He paused, peering at the map's lines, "I so could have used this when I was making those maps. I wanted to make the stairs move, but couldn't figure out how."

In the margins of the map, small as they were, a quick line of text appeared, in the loopy, yet clean writing of the calmest Marauder, 'Mssr. Moony would like to warn the youngest Marauder that simply copying the map will not work. The books needed for making copies of the map are in the Restricted Section, and are charms texts. The New Marauders will need to find charms on animating cartographic marks to make staircases move in their new maps.'

"Uhm," Harry blinked, "Thank you."

Scribbling down the suggestion, Fred made a mental note as well. Then the three peered at the map, and noticed that on the third floor, there was a large dot that stayed in one place.

"That must be Fluffy," George pointed, "Wicked big dot for him."

"You haven't seen that before?" Harry looked up.

"Oh we'd seen it," Fred blinked, "but before that conversation with Hagrid, the dot never made any sense."

"Hm," Harry mumbled, "So how do you shut the map back off?"

"Mischief Managed," the twins chorused and grinned as Harry blinked, recognizing the phrase.

"So that's why you two always laughed when I said that at the end of pranks!" Harry mock glared at the two redheads.

Laughing, the three settled down, further revising the papers due in just a couple of days. Losing track of time, the boys only realized it was time for lunch when their stomachs growled loudly. Sheepishly looking at one another, they stood and went to the Great Hall to eat.

After eating, they returned to their hidey-hole, and continued working. Harry finished his paper, having extended it to within three inches of

what Hermione said she'd written, and picked up the book to his right. He'd meant to pick up the new book the Potions Master had given him, but instead picked up one of the books they'd checked out for the Flamel reference, but hadn't gotten to. He blinked, shrugged, and settled in to read. After a bit, he was amazed to encounter the name of Nicholas Flamel. Making enough noise to get the attention of his cohorts, Harry called out, "Finally! I found his name somewhere!" "So what'd he do?" Fred stopped writing instantly.

With a noise that was somewhere between a snicker and a whimper, Harry read from the book, "'Nicholas Flamel is famous for his Alchemic works, not the least of which is the only known successful configuration of the Philosopher's Stone.' At least now we know what's on the third floor."

"So, now we find out what a Philosopher's Stone does, right?" Fred stood from the table, prepared to go to the library again."

The trio started out of their headquarters, muttering about the stone and what possible uses it could have that someone would want to steal it for. In their preoccupation, they never realized that standing just in the shadows to the right of their secret room, was a person who'd hidden there as they came out, and heard all of their theories, and most definitely what was hiding the item they spoke of, and what it was called.

This is the second version of the chapter, and I think I like it a bit better. I'm trying to convey the beginnings of Harry's ultimate goal. The reason why he was sorted into Slytherin. He's still got some eye-opening experiences ahead of him, that will shape exactly what he does when he finishes school, but he's pretty well set on the path he set for himself when he heard of the Wizarding World, its distaste for Slytherins, and how Slytherins have reacted to it. That's not to say that his goal cannot be changed, just that he's quite determined. Fixed a typo. Also finagled a detail to fit with something pointed out to me. I read through the first book again, rather than that section, and discovered that the book with the information on Flamel was never named. If someone else knows its name, I'll add it in, but I've now fixed it so it's not in Hogwarts: A History. Next step, editing chapter twelve to agree. Thanks to back-in-black22 again.

When classes resumed, the three boys quickly turned in the papers to McGonagall and Snape. They spoke with Miss Granger and made sure she'd turned hers in as well, and Harry was exasperated to find that the girl had revised her paper at the last minute, and it had thusly gone from three inches less than Harry's, to nine and a half more. Upon hearing this, Harry looked at her crossly and told her that any consequences of that were on her own head, as he'd made it clear she was to leave off revisions after she told him how much she'd written.

Abashed, the girl nodded and accepted the grumbling. Then she spoke of how she'd accidentally encountered the information on Alchemy by Muggle standards and just had to include it. Groaning, Harry told her to share her notes with him anyway. He figured that even if he couldn't use it for the paper, it would be good to know the information, in case of Snape quizzing him on it. Not knowing it for the paper would be just barely acceptable, but not learning it right after Granger returned would not.

As the four worked on their notes for Alchemy, Harry was reminded of what they'd discovered during the break.

"Granger, we figured out what Fluffy's guarding." Harry piped up while scanning notes in the girl's handwriting and copying out his own.

"Really?" she stopped working on her fifth revision of the assignment from Transfiguration given that morning.

"Yeah." Fred nodded. Harry didn't look up to make sure, he'd heard differences in their voices recently and had reached the point that he could tell them apart by that now.

"Harry accidentally picked up a book he hadn't meant to, one we hadn't gotten through yet and found mention of Flamel being the only person successful in creating the Philosopher's Stone." George finished.

"Oh!" the girl scrambled for a clean sheet of paper to scribble this down on.

"Relax," Harry snorted. Quietly, as they were in the library, where the quartet met to work on this research project, he told her, "we already have notes on it. Roughly ten pages worth," nodding at the twins, one pulled the sheaf out of his carrier pouch, "Without our notetaker, we had to make do, so it's in my cramped handwriting."

"Then I'll just recopy it to make it more-" she stopped speaking as the boys shook their heads.

Fred shook his head one last time and continued. "We don't need it more legible. We came to the decision that if that's what Fluffy's guarding, and it came from Gringott's-

"Then it was suspiciously timed, as there was a break in at Gringott's shortly afterwards." George added

"And if someone's desperate enough to try stealing it from Gringott's, then there are plenty of protections here to prevent just that." Harry finished. It seemed Granger was beginning to get used to the three-part swing of conversations with them that had developed midway through the first term.

"So you don't want your notes easily read in case someone tries to use the information you've gathered to help themselves out?" she guessed.

"Exactly." Fred grinned.

As she read the notes for the sake of reading them, she suddenly stopped, and penned something quickly to the side of one of the notations. To prevent the squawking she was sure was coming, she explained, "I overheard the Headmaster speaking to someone shortly after school started, and just after the Prophet reported the break in at Gringott's, that he was glad he'd removed 'it' when he had. He also said that he was just as glad he'd only told a select few that he was thinking of removing it from Gringott's."

"Did he say anything about who he'd told?" Harry wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know. Once they'd let the girl in on the information they had, she'd jumped at the fact that during the fiasco at Halloween,

Snape had been injured. She was sure he was the one after whatever had been hidden behind Fluffy, and Harry had a feeling that she had more evidence to stack against the professor. Truthfully, Harry didn't have any evidence that specifically said it couldn't be the Potions Master, so he couldn't grump at Granger much about it, though his personal suspicions were on Quirrell. Anyone who stuttered over the words 'innocence' and 'purity' on a regular basis was suspect in his opinion. Especially when they had no trouble with 'malevolence,' and 'injury.' That didn't even cover the whole sibilants issue, Harry was so sick of hearing 's' sounds dragged out almost all class period, if he had to hear it out of class, he covered his ears and whimpered.

"Yes!" Now Harry knew he didn't want to know, though he did, because the girl's expression spoke of her having more 'proof' of Snape's duplicity, "He said he'd told Professors Snape, McGonagall, Quirrell, Sprout, Flitwick, and he'd obviously told Hagrid. This proves that Snape is after it!"

"No it doesn't!" Harry snapped, finally able to say something about it, "It just narrows down the possibilities. We're fairly certain Flitwick, Sprout and Hagrid had nothing to do with the break in, because we've learned they were accounted for."

"McGonagall wouldn't have done it!" Granger yelped.

Shushing the girl, Harry grumped, "Are you so sure? Do you have proof? The only reason I haven't jumped your case about assuming that it's Snape is because I don't have iron-clad proof it wasn't. But you need to have that kind of proof before assuming it isn't McGonagall, or even Quirrell for that matter either."

Pausing, the girl seemed to realize something, "You've never believed it was Professor Snape, have you Potter?"

"No., " Harry looked at the table. "I don't want to think it's him. He's helped me so much with information. No, he's not nice, and no I don't think he's entirely good, but then who is?"

"I see." The girl relaxed. "Fine then. We'll work on getting absolute proof that it is or isn't one of the three. But things are heavily against it not being Snape."

Fred butted in, and Harry was grateful, "Actually, it's just as heavily against it not being Quirrell as well, 'Mione. After all, we did run across a notation somewhere that the man was skilled with trolls, and what broke into the castle on Halloween? Past Hogwarts' protections? Sneaking through the guards of the professors even?"

"And who brought it to everyone's attention?" George grinned.

"Oh my goodness," Hermione paled, "that tips the scales entirely. I'm so sorry, Har- Potter,-"

"I don't like to think that it would be Professor Snape, but we can't discount him. It was in his office after all, that the note was found. All the same, we'd better do something about it. After all, Hagrid's been pretty easy about telling people that all you need to deal with Fluffy is a simple spell." Harry admitted.

Nodding, the other three gathered supplies, and headed for the third floor corridor. While Granger kept guard, the boys placed all kinds of tricks and traps around the entryway and the doors, so intruders would have a hard time getting past them. They also resolved to check and replace them every few days to ensure they wouldn't fail.

Imagine their surprise when a few days later they overheard Hagrid complaining about how hard it was to even get to the door to feed Fluffy anymore. Sheepishly, the quartet decided to leave things as they were, figuring that if Hagrid was having a hard time of it, so would anyone trying to get past the Cerberus.

A few weeks of this passed, and aside from renewing their traps, the quartet more or less forgot about the Philosopher's Stone, as they had no intentions of getting any more involved. The detentions they'd all gotten from Professor Snape in spite of their papers ensured that. Though, Granger's was because she had once again, written much more than she needed to.

Speaking of Potions, Harry had noticed over the year, that the Potions Master would periodically change partners for Longbottom, as no student wanted to be matched with the boy for more than a couple weeks at a time. Some of the noisier Slytherins half-joked about asking for battle pay when they were set to work with the hapless Gryffindor, but in all this time, Snape had yet to pair the boy with Harry. This puzzled him until, midway through term, Snape stood in front of the class, and indicated that he was, once again, changing partners for Longbottom. With a deep sigh, he stated that for the rest of the term, Longbottom and Potter would work together. Having had his hopes crushed by the unbelievable failure of Granger's partnership with the boy, Snape wasn't figuring that matching him with a highly successful student would prevent explosions. He was just hoping that something could be salvaged from the explosions, as had proven true when Longbottom had worked with Malfoy, Zabini, Nott, and Granger. Together with Harry, they formed the top five of the class, and were spread out in the top ten for first years all together.

Sighing as he moved, Harry prepared to be redoing the potion that night, to get a grade on it all the same. When he plunked himself down next to Longbottom, he noticed that the boy, while still as scared as ever of the Professor, wasn't as terrified as he'd been any other time he was working with a Slytherin. Puzzled, Harry mentally set to working out how this could be, until he shrugged and figured the boy knew Harry wasn't going to pick on him, as Malfoy and Nott had done, and he wasn't going to leave it all to him as Parkinson, Bulstrode, Thomas, and Ron had done.

After a few minutes of taking down the instructions, Harry set the paper on Longbottom's side of the desk, saying, "Read that a couple of times, I'll go get the ingredients."

Standing and gathering the supplies, Harry noticed that the Professor was already writing up the make up lab for that night. Blinking, Harry muttered, "Sir, that potion looks like something third years do."

"And the fact that you recognize that means it is still within your skill set," the man returned, "Potter, please return to your desk before your partner sets the desk on fire."

Whirling around, Harry noticed Longbottom was trying to light the fire under the cauldron he'd set up, but was setting the fire too high. With a groan, Harry dashed back to the table and set the ingredients down. Taking Longbottom's wand, Harry asked, "Let's not go there, please? Longbottom, do you know how to chop?"

Blinking, Longbottom hesitantly nodded.

Taking the spare bit of Snapper Root he'd collected, Harry set it in front of the other boy, and pulled his knife from the supply kit, "Prove it. I keep the blade sharp enough to cut fingers off, because otherwise it wouldn't cut half of the stuff it needs to, so when you chop, keep your fingers like this." Harry mimed a few chops, setting his hand on top of the roots, with the fingertips pointed towards the table, so his knuckles stood out. He used the knife with the other hand and made it clear that the knuckles were used to guide the blade in place. The knife just rocked along the surface, and at no point did it entirely leave it. "Does that help?"

Judging by the look on Longbottom's face, Harry had taught him something he really wanted to keep, and the boy rushed to mimic Harry's actions. First on just the table, then on the roots. When Harry looked up after setting the fire under the cauldron and preparing the other ingredients, he noticed that Longbottom was doing rather well. Looking around, Harry noticed that Professor Snape was on the other side of the room. Not wanting to upset the balance, but needing to know, Harry piped up, "Longbottom, why are you so hopeless in this class?"

"Well," Stopping chopping, the boy looked at Harry, "I never understand anything, and I'm not really good with a knife. I'm such a klutz, and I just don't understand anything in here."

Snorting, Harry pointed at the roots in front of Longbottom, "You've done a decent enough job on those. I know you know Herbology, and you're not completely hopeless in Transfiguration. I think if you just slowed down and allowed yourself to move at your own pace things would go a lot better."

"B-but I'm too slow!" the other boy let the knife rest on the table as he turned to Harry, who was adding the ground Parsa wings, and waiting for the potion to turn lemon yellow, "And the colors the instructions tell me to watch for, th-they never make sense!"

"I'm sure, if you asked nicely, and worked out a trade, Crabbe would be willing to help you out with that," Harry tried not to laugh at the shellshocked expression on Longbottom's face. "Hey, we all want this classroom to stop having the record for explosions in class."

"O-oh," Longbottom looked at the roots again, and asked aloud, "Are these chopped enough, H-h-har- er, Potter?"

Looking quickly, the darker-haired boy nodded, "Scoop them up, and drop them in, the potion's ready for them."

Quickly scooping them up, Longbottom dropped them in quickly. Wincing, Harry knew that even if they managed to not blow it up, he was still taking advantage of the make up potion if he could that night. Because he'd be spending a lot of time stirring out the air dropping the roots in had introduced, this was going to be runny and thin. Thus, it would take a triple dose to work for anyone.

"Really, Longbottom," Harry shook his head, and tried to stir out the air bubbles the plopping root chunks had created in the potion, "Potions isn't that different from cooking."

He realized he'd spoken too loudly when the Potions Master stopped in front of their desk, looked at the liming mess in front of them, and sneered, "Care to explain that, Mister Potter? I wasn't aware you knew anything of cooking in the first place to compare the two."

"Well sir," Harry winced as he got the last air bubble out of the potion, just as it turned green enough for the next ingredient. He added that, still stirring, and adding the next ingredient as he spoke, "They both work with recipes, require specific ingredients, precise measurements, and set times to stew, cook, and prepare. They require set temperatures, and are often ingested. The main difference is that in Potions, you wouldn't be eating very many of the ingredients on their own, while in cooking, nearly everything is edible outside of a recipe

as well. You're just as capable of making people sick with a mistake in cooking as in Potions," Harry paused as he added the last ingredient. Which caused the potion to puff white for a couple of seconds, and there he realized that the whole class was paying attention, "and while explosions are caused by the equipment more often in cooking as opposed to bad combinations of ingredients as in Potions, cooking can still be deadly. I don't like to think of the times that my aunt nearly poisoned us when she actually cooked. That was why I didn't have many problems with that chore being almost exclusively mine."

The air of the room changed, and Harry realized he'd given something about his home life away. Not just to Slytherins, but basically, to the whole school. Harry mentally gave a point to the Professor for tricking such a confession out of him, but at the same time, was growling at the man in his mind for pulling such a trick.

Nodding and looking at the potion as it rested, Snape smirked, "One point to Slytherin for an explanation of the processes of cooking and Potions' making that even Muggleborns can understand. A point to Slytherin for the first potion made, in concert with Longbottom, which didn't explode this year. Pity it isn't exactly what your assignment was."  
"

With that, Harry and Neville joined the rest of the class in packing up and cleaning out their cauldrons. As he did so, Harry mused on the adult's parting remark. He had asked Professor Snape long ago why he terrorized Longbottom so, and the response the man gave indicated that it was just as much for the fun of it as it was to keep the house of lions in line. Harry had asked if he could leave off, at least on Longbottom for a while, so that the boy might learn how to actually make potions instead of explosions. The professor had given Harry a detention for his cheekiness, but had deigned to consider it. He'd since then, been a lot less caustic, and had noticed that the potions Longbottom worked on exploded a lot later in the process. It seemed Longbottom's fear levels corresponded directly with the times of the explosions. This proved Harry's theory, and while he suspected he'd cemented himself as Longbottom's partner for the remaining four years the other boy would be in Potions, at least he'd get plenty of practice in explaining things to people.

Next chapter will be where I bring in dragon troubles and some more Quirrelly-ness, I think. Don't worry, Harry hasn't taken the fangs from the snake. Snape will still mock Longbottom, but I'm hoping that this one success, and the explanations will help the shy Gryffie shore up the courage to not blow the potions up quite as much.

Originally, this had Snape giving a point to Gryffindor for Neville actually completing the potion, but I realized that that was waay too nice. I'm even thinking of taking out the whole last paragraph. Any suggestions?

Though I haven't been remembering too well, I do have Spider Lily to thank for catching my typing bloopers among other things. heeee. It's a trick of my brain moving faster than my fingers can type, so things get funny. 'teh' seems to be my favorite word, but I'm fairly good at catching it. Thanks again to back-in-black22 for catching a silly detail I'd slipped up on. Got it fixed. Hope to keep those to a minimum so people don't just give up on reading, but will still be willing to point them out to me.

As Longbottom's partner for the rest of the term, Harry had plenty of opportunities to glean information from the other boy about Herbology. He used the information for all it was worth. Though the heavier boy wasn't very skilled at Potions, Transfiguration or Charms, he was no worse than any Hufflepuff at Defense, and as far as Harry could find, unparalleled at Herbology. Being a good little Slytherin, he took notes from what Longbottom spoke of in class, and studied them. He'd had decent grades before, but 'every little bit helps' was definitely one of Harry's catchphrases.

The goodwill generated by Harry helping Longbottom extended through Potions and Defense classes only. The other Slytherins wanted to keep the accident prone Gryffindor far away from their delicate projects. At the same time, the other Gryffindors wanted to keep the 'Snoopy Slytherin' from their secrets. At that, Harry laughed. They didn't seem to realize that he wasn't interested in secrets, just information he could actually use.

One day, as Harry sat through the torture that was Defense Against the Dark Arts, he pondered what exactly about the man got on his nerves. When he thought about it, Harry could live with the stutter. It really wasn't as though the man stumbled over every word, and Harry knew that he couldn't help it. He supposed he could make do with the hissing as well, though that was something Harry couldn't figure out. Quirrell was not reptilian in nature. He seemed almost phobic of them in fact. Well, that didn't mean much, as the professor seemed frightened of his own shadow most of the time. So, even though Harry only heard the hissing around the professor, he wasn't going to hate the man for it. He wanted to, but he wouldn't let himself. For all he knew, the man had a condition that required an oxygen tank or something. Though how that would happen in the Wizarding World, Harry didn't even want to think about.

Having eliminated his two biggest complaints about the Defense teacher, Harry wondered why he didn't want to take his name off the list of suspects. It couldn't be the fact that every class with him, Harry left nursing a headache. That was no more the fault of the instructor than the stutter. Having pointed all of these facts out to himself, Harry had to wonder if Granger had some merit in her suspicions towards Professor Snape. After all, Quirrell was the ultimate in harmless

looking folk, while Snape couldn't pass for harmless with his arms and legs missing. The incident at Halloween with the troll seemed to be the only sticking point in eliminating suspicion on Quirrell entirely, which made Harry wonder if there was someone working with him, and threatening him to gain the cooperation. Again, this was something the Potions Master was quite capable of.

Harry just barely pulled himself out of his musings to notice that he'd been called upon for demonstration of a hex. If he had any reason to suspect Quirrell of anything, this was it. After all, Harry didn't figure it was just coincidence that the man called him up to the front of the class every time he wanted to demonstrate a new hex, curse or jinx. There were one or two times through the year where someone other than Harry had been called upon, but those were instances of that student being so painfully obnoxious that Quirrell's seeming favoritism of casting at Harry had to take a back seat to discipline.

This, of course, meant that Harry was regularly closer to the man than he cared to be, having to listen to the hissing up close, and somehow, his headaches unfailingly began at these points. Steeling himself for a long-winded explanation, complete with false starts, and a headache of monumental proportions, Harry stalked to the front of the classroom. Which happened to also be the center.

"Now, s-s-since you all have completed the Body Bind, it's t-t-time to move onto the Jelly L-legs Curse," Quirrell began, and Harry quickly searched around for something to hold onto or to at least break his fall with. Just the name of it told him all he'd ever wanted to know. If his notes were right, this would make him feel like the bones of his legs had disappeared. He relaxed a little as the professor continued, "This s-s-spell is usually used against one's attackers. It was c-c-created by a witch who ran r-r-rather slowly, and got tired of her purs-s-uers catching her. I will n-n-now demonstrate this curse on M-m-mister P-Potter."

Wincing as the hissing in his ears and pounding in his head teamed with the sudden feeling of his legs moving sideways, between his knees and ankles, Harry grabbed the desk he stood next to and tried to brace himself with it.

"As you can see," Quirrel added, "Her as-s-sailants were forced to c-c-ease their intentions towards her, as they couldn't even walk. This spell is most easily countered by 'Finite Incantatum,' but sometimes one must wait out the ef-fects of it."

With that, the man turned to the rest of the class and proceeded to coach them on the pronunciation of the spell. Even while he was infuriated, Harry resigned himself to remaining where he was. It was times like these that the boy was led to believe Professor Quirrell was testing him for something. Mentally shrugging, as he always did, Harry set about breaking the spell. The first time Professor Quirrell had cast a hex at Harry, the poor boy promptly cast it right back. He lost points for his effrontery, was assigned a six foot essay on making sure one knew the effects of a spell in its entirety before casting it upon someone, and was given detention with Filch. Thus, after the first demonstration, Harry had been asked to leave his wand at his desk, so he had to make do with sheer willpower in his efforts to free himself. This meant the boy wasn't exactly countering the spell, just forcing himself to disbelieve what his nerves were trying to tell him.

When he felt confident enough, Harry stood up again, and turned towards the rows of desk nearest his seat. He got as far as he could with the support of Quirrell's desk, but had to take a leap of faith when it came time to bridge the gap between the adult's desk and the students'. Barely daring to trust he'd make it, Harry sighed deeply when his hands met the edge of Zabini's desk. The darker boy met Harry's eyes and, taking the chance of disrupting the class, spoke the common counter to the Curse.

Sighing deeply in relief, even as Quirrell whirled his attention to the two boys, Harry braced himself for a recast of the spell, with admonishment to not allow himself to rely on others to solve his problems.

"Ah, M-m-mister P-potter," Quirrell was actually smiling to a degree, and Harry almost found that even scarier than the lecture he was sure to get, "Congratulations on reaching that distance while Cursed. Many others have t-tried, but failed to even s-stand. I s-s-suppose this is yet another si-signal of your determination to s-s-succeed. Even if the spell was cast at only half-strength."

Muttering under his breath, Harry nodded anyway, and continued to his desk, slowly. The professor continued to teach the rest of the class about the spell, and Harry continued to wonder what exactly about the man got on his nerves.

When the class ended, no one was happier than Harry was. While the rest of the class was still packing, Harry had already shoved his supplies into his bag and dashed off. This was the only class he had so little consideration for his parchment and quills, but he figured they'd forgive him, as he was really quite desperate to get out of that room before Professor Quirrell decided to do another demonstration on him.

In his haste to leave the room, Harry almost didn't notice the rest of the Slytherins catching up to him. They were muttering not so quietly that Quirrell seemed to have it in for Harry, and the Gryffindors, just behind, seemed to agree. Having thought to never see this day, Harry froze in place. The others only caught on once he was in the midst of the two groups.

"I almost hate to say it," the brunet boy drawled, "but do the lot of you even realize you're agreeing with one another about something?"

"Potter." Ron stepped forward, with a tense look on his face, "Gryffindors may seem to be blind to you snakes, but even we can pick up on a teacher who's picked a target to torture. Unless they deserve it, no one should have a teacher targeting them for demonstration of all the hexes."

"We don't see you as deserving it." Finnegan piped up, almost as wound as the redhead, "What with you keeping your House in line and all."

Bristling, Harry snapped, "Don't look at it as me keeping them in line. Think of it as us showing you that you aren't perfectly innocent either."

Blinking, Thomas tried to soothe flaring tempers, "We were giving you credit there, Potter. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"It shouldn't be a case of us having to prove we're not deserving of such treatment," Harry growled, and started walking again, headed for the Slytherin Common Room, "We should have the same considerations you give to other Gryffindors, to Hufflepuffs and to Ravenclaws. After all, we're just as human, as wizard as you."

"Potter," Nott grabbed Harry's sleeve slightly, trying to diffuse the tempers, "Now's not the time for this. Remember your great plan. Try this now and you'll have to burn it all up and restart."

The other Slytherins smirked at the expressions on the faces of the Gryffindors before them. Harry calmed just enough to nod at his classmates and not yell at anyone that got in his way.

He finally cooled down enough by the time he reached the Common Room that he could actually say the password, "Unidad," without the entire hallway hearing him. Quickly dropping off what he didn't need in the First Years' room, he pulled his text out and started on the essay. He was just starting to write about the process of making a table into a chair and vice versa, when the rest of the first years clumped around him.

"So, Potter," Bulstrode started the conversation, "What are you going to do about Quirrell?"

"Taking it to the Headmaster won't do any good," Parkinson flipped her hair over her shoulder, "You're a Slytherin, he seems to think this kind of thing is 'character building' material for us."

"You haven't already tried—" Harry started, indignant.

"Not in specific detail," Zabini waved at him to calm down, "We just mentioned that Quirrell was targeting one student for demonstration purposes every class period."

"He sounded like he was going to do something about it at first," Bustrode grumbled, "but when we mentioned that it was a fellow Slytherin, he—"

"He said, and I quote," Parkinson butted in, "'It will work out children, I'm sure your friend will learn a great deal from this. It will help him to build character.' As if we need anything else to help us with that!"

"Did you at least make sure there were some first years besides myself missing when you asked?" Harry wasn't sure he wanted to know. But he had to ask.

"What kind of idiots do you take us for, Potter?" Nott asked, indignant, "You, Malfoy, and I weren't there."

"The fact that you took it to him at all makes me nervous," Harry grumbled, "He's always seemed to be watching my every move, like he's trying to make sure of something. If he knew for sure that I was the one Quirrell was harassing, I almost think he'd actually ask the man to step it up a notch."

"Why, Potter," Malfoy's voice was somewhere between mocking and disbelieving, "One would think you don't trust the headmaster."

"I don't know what to make of him," Harry muttered, "We hardly ever see him at school, aside from meals, yet he knows almost everything that goes on at the school. How can a person do that?"

When no one else had an answer, Harry moved to quickly change the subject. The group came to a consensus to use the time left before dinner to make progress on their Defense and History essays. By the time they went to supper, nearly everyone was either done with their essays or was in the final tweaking stages of them.

Reaching the Great Hall, the Slytherin first years sat in a clump. This was neither common nor rare, as the group was usually divided into factions. Harry's usual group was folk like Bulstrode, who liked to quiz him on Quidditch. Otherwise, he'd sit with Zabini or Nott. Both of whom had more fun making sure Harry didn't forget how to differentiate between shades of green. Everyone else in that year tended to sit at the other end of the table, with Malfoy, who was shaping up to be the lord of the first years. If Harry had wanted to fight for the role, he would have cared more, but all Harry really wanted was to prove that Light had just as many shortcomings as

Dark. This tended to alienate him from the rest of the Slytherins, who weren't quite sure how he would stand a chance of making this clear to the rest of the school, much less the rest of the Wizarding world. If he wasn't surrounded by the other three, Harry invariably found himself surrounded by the Quidditch players, and discussing training, practice, or future plans the team had for games, and Harry's progress on rejuvenating the team's reputation.

After finishing his meal, Harry headed off to headquarters to work on projects for their pranks. Along the way, he caught a glimpse of Hagrid, as the tall man apparently headed back to his cabin from the Infirmary. Blinking, Harry wondered what could have hurt someone who specialized in dangerous creatures to the point that he'd go to the nurse for treatment. Paying closer attention, Harry spotted that the man's right hand was swelled to nearly double its usual size, and Harry figured that something had bitten the man, and that something happened to have some kind of swelling causing component in its bite.

Deciding he was better off leaving it alone, Harry continued on his way in the direction of Hogwarts' kitchen. Upon reaching the wall by the pear painting, Harry muttered, 'spatula,' and walked in the newly revealed door, and turned to watch it close behind him. Sitting, Harry pulled his notes from his bag, and worked on a few details to their latest plan for the end of the year. He'd finished what he brought with him, and had started researching a charm for his personal map project, when the door opened again, and the twins zipped through.

"Ah, Harry," the first ping-pong match of the day started with Fred, "We saw you at the Great Hall, looking preoccupied, and more than a little grumpy. We wondered if it had anything to do with Ron. Speaking of which, have you seen our little brother?"

"Not since class let out and both halves went their separate ways," Harry looked up, "Why?"

"He's been mumbling with Thomas and Finnegan about Hagrid having something dangerous, and asked us if we'd gotten a return message from the one he sent to Charlie in Romania," George started round two of the game, and Harry chuckled internally. The

twins only tried to confuse Harry like this when they were either on a severe sugar high, or when they were worried.

"He wouldn't let us read it," Fred grumbled.

"Hm," Harry remembered seeing Hagrid earlier and explained to the twins, "I think I can see why Ron would be worried. I saw Hagrid earlier, walking out of the Infirmary, nursing a hand that was bandaged, but almost twice its normal size."

"What could have done that?" George pondered, "Fang likes to bite Hagrid's hand while playing, but even Fang's bites don't cause swelling."

Suddenly Harry remembered that Hagrid had seemed more than a little tired, and even a bit singed in the beard, and mentioned it to the twins.

"What bites, burns, and keeps you awake for hours on end?" Harry posed the question to the air around them.

"Well, a lot of things bite, and most of those keep one awake as well," Fred muttered.

"But I can't imagine any of those that burn you as well," George suddenly stopped, and his twin froze at the same time, "Wait, dragons!"

"That's right," Fred sucked in a deep breath of air, "Charlie works at a Dragon Refuge, and baby dragon bites cause swelling."

"So Ron's trying to get a dragon out of Hagrid's hut?" Harry blinked, then snickered, "He'd better hope it happens soon, Hagrid lives in a wooden building. One wrong breath would leave the man homeless."

"I don't suppose there's anything we can do to help, is there?" George seemed resigned.

"Probably better if we leave things alone," Fred agreed.

"Anything we do would have to take place after curfew anyway," Harry snorted, "And Invisibility cloak or not, I'm not taking that chance. Who knows who else we'd run into?"

Having resolved that, the three worked together on their plans for an end-of-the-year prank. They were debating on turning the hair of Gryffindors green and of Slytherins red, or charming the decorations of the four tables to switch locations with each utterance of the word 'house.' Finally, the three realized that the alarm they usually set to go off ten minutes before curfew had not gone off, and that meant that they were almost two hours past curfew. Luckily, Harry's cloak was in headquarters that night, so they all ducked under it. Upon reaching the Gryffindor portal, the twins noticed that it was just swinging shut, and they quickly dashed through, only to swing right back out muttering about their crazy younger brother.

"Harry, go check towards Hagrid's hut," Fred whispered frantically.

"We think that whatever plan they had going was going to take place tonight," George held out a note, that read to the same effect.

"Sure, but what do I do when I find him?" Harry whispered back.

"Find a way to get him back to the Common Room without getting him or you caught," George grimaced, "Pranking him for being a prat is one thing, but him losing points for trying to help Hagrid..."

With that, the twins slipped back into their Common Room, and Harry slipped away, towards the lower levels of the castle. He had to bite his lip to keep from laughing as the portrait in front of Gryffindor Commons grumbled about her wall maybe being jammed, then went back to sleep. He dashed as quickly and as quietly as possible to the ground level of the school. On his way there, he had to hug the wall, as Malfoy dashed past, heading, of all places, to upper levels of the school. Harry got a sinking feeling that Malfoy was heading for McGonagall.

His sinking feeling spread to the rest of his body when he saw the four adults tying a young dragon in a cage to their brooms. The young dragon was taking swipes at anything stupid enough to get close and

the three Gryffindors watching weren't even thinking about getting back to their Common Room. He shook his head as the Romanian preserve workers lifted off the ground, and mentally urged Thomas, Finnegan or Ron to get their heads screwed back on before Malfoy came back. Finally, they snapped out of it, but at that exact moment, McGonagall came stalking into the area, fiercely glaring at all three, and even at Hagrid.

"I have never!" she fumed out loud, "I thought better of you three! There is absolutely no reason to be out this late. You all have detentions with Filch this Friday, and will have to explain to the rest of your House how you lost them fifty points!"

"Fifty points!?" Ron yelled.

"Apiece," the professor snapped.

The Gryffindors were fuming. At the same time, Malfoy finally caught up to the woman, and was smirking. Harry felt like smacking that smirk off his face, and was about to do something recklessly Gryffindorish to do so, but Professor McGonagall whirled and met the blonde's eyes squarely and informed him, "And that includes you Mister Malfoy."

"What?" he yelled, matching notes with Ron unintentionally.

"I said there was no reason to be out of bed this late, and even if you had good intentions," the tone of her voice indicated that she doubted this idea very much, "you had no more excuse than they. Therefore, you will serve the same detention as they, and have lost Slytherin fifty points as well."

She herded the four boys towards the castle, and unknowingly had a fifth boy following. Harry got more than a little nervous as Fang seemed to want to growl at him, but Harry had no intentions of losing Slytherin another fifty points to go with Malfoy's loss. In fact, Harry suspected that he might lose even more points than any of the other four boys had, though he'd had nothing to do with the dragon-sized escapade.

Shuffling along behind them, Harry was infuriated as the woman sent her trio to their tower, trusting they would go where she directed, but felt she had to guide Malfoy straight to Professor Snape's door. Having had a few close encounters with the man patrolling the halls, Harry held back, not wanting to be caught out this time.

As soon as the Potions Master's door opened, the Transfiguration Professor snapped her attention to the man, who had obviously been awoken by her sharp raps on his door.

"One of your Slytherins was wandering the halls," she began, "And encountered three of my Gryffindors being fools after curfew. I've subtracted fifty points per child, and assigned a detention with Filch for all of them. I leave him in your hands, do as you will to further the lesson."

As she stalked off, Harry held his breath, hoping to not have been spotted himself. When he peered back around the corner, his green eyes met the coal-black ones of his Head of House. The adult had ushered Malfoy into the room, and had stepped out. Harry was sure he'd told the boy he was making sure McGonagall had actually left.

"Potter, I know you're out there," Snape muttered, "You had best get to your bed quickly, for if I catch you, there will be five detentions with Filch on Friday instead of just four."

Harry held his breath as the man continued to stare through him, holding as still as he possibly could. Finally, the Potions Master nodded to himself, muttered a curt 'good night,' and closed his door. Waiting a few seconds, Harry scuttled to the hidden door to the Common Room and dashed downstairs to the first year sleeping room. He quickly stashed the cloak among his things to carry around the next day, and prepared for bed.

In his anxiousness to keep out of trouble, Harry never stopped to think about how the man had known he was there, regardless of the cloak he was covered in. Nor did he wonder why the man didn't just give him the detention for being caught at all.

The end of this chapter is getting on my nerves. Hopefully it is better in the eyes of the readers than it is in my eyes. Wonder what Harry's going to do about McGonagall...

Please forgive the Quirrell issue with Dumbledore, its a case of the Headmaster hearing children complain about a professor, and figuring that they are exaggerating how often the student is used as an example. Working on the story into the second year, I have plans for dealing with it. Oh, and Harry's the only one who can hear the hissing, being what it is. It's not Parseltongue.

For those of you that can stand this chapter (I'm not on that list, but I had to bring in the Dragon incident more clearly, or just mentioning it later wouldn't make any sense to anyone) there's a movie reference tied in that I give e-mail cookies to the person who identifies it. Or all of you who do, I don't mind. Plus, any tips on fixing this chapter will make me happy, even if it means I have to rewrite it and the next two. Oh, yes, that's what's left. Two more chapters for Harry's first year.

The aftermath of the 'Dragon Dunder,' as the Junior Marauders dubbed it was not pretty, to say the least. The three Gryffindor boys were ostracized by the rest of their House, and even the Houses of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff seemed eager to mock them. Notable exceptions to this were Granger and Longbottom, though the youngest Weasley, Thomas, and Finnegan didn't seem to pay any heed to this.

Harry tried not to feel too much glee. It wouldn't be noticed amidst the proudly displayed joy found in the rest of his House, but for a different reason. While the other Slytherins rejoiced in their nearly guaranteed victory in House Cup standings, Malfoy's point loss notwithstanding, but Harry was more interested in the other Houses showing how like Slytherin they really were. After all, it was common knowledge in the other houses that Slytherins would turn on you as soon as it was to their advantage, yet, what had the other three Houses done?

This led Harry to agree with the twins about staying their pranking ideas for a time. At least any directed towards the youngest Weasley at school. To ensure teachers suspected nothing, they also left Malfoy alone. Why should they give away that one of them knew more details than the rest of the school?

Even through the ruckus over the dragon that the majority of the school would never know about, Harry noticed the stress levels of some of the older students. Specifically, Flint, Bletchley, Higgs, Derrick and Bole all got rather snappy when the other Quidditch players commented on homework being rough. This led Harry to decide that the safer path with OWL and NEWT-bound students was to leave them alone until and unless they decided to seek him out.

Ironically, the older Quidditch players seemed content to form a miniature study group, and let Harry in on it sometimes. Not that he provided much more than a more impartial question reader. If he hadn't figured that stealing their books would literally get him cursed senseless, the fifth and seventh year boys would have lost their books for a week or so, while the first year copied information down. Instead, he committed as much to memory as possible, hoping that it would stick around long enough for him to get it noted in Headquarters.

As the exams presented themselves to the school, more and more students ran around, as Harry called it, 'like chickens with their heads cut off,' and his description earned him more than a few odd looks among the Slytherins. Strangely, it seemed to have provided a brief moment of humor even to the Head of the House.

Having been part of study groups for OWLs and NEWTs on the sly, and helping his own year mates more directly, Harry found his first year tests to be almost universally easier than he'd expected. Admittedly, Herbology was a bit of a challenge, as it was the first test Sprout had administered that actually required her students to sit and write on paper to prove their knowledge, but the only other classes of any difficulty were Defense and Potions. The first was difficult because Harry was still used as the testing dummy, and rarely got a chance to actually cast any of the spells.

Right after said exam, Harry sat at lunch and discussed with his fellow first years how they could make future tests and classes much easier. He hoped they would catch on to the idea, even though it would require cooperation with other houses, because it would be useful in more ways than just grade-boosting.

"Potter," Malfoy was shaking his head, "You're still going on too much about blending us with the rest of the school."

"That's not what it's about in this case," Harry sighed. He was beginning to see that he'd been too blunt about his ultimate goal to start with. He wondered how to cut it back so they didn't see what he was up to quite so easily, but wasn't sure he wanted to hide it, "I'm doing this for our grades as well. Maybe even more so for this reason."

Zabini drawled, offering his input, "Oh, really? What reason could you have for us to work with other Houses other than for your gray campaign to have another step taken?"

"Well, for one thing," Harry rolled his eyes, and finished another bite of corn, "Surely your parents have taught you the values of networking? I heard about the problems that some of the older

Slytherins are having in their classes because none of them were particularly skilled in Runes. So they didn't have anyone to further explain what they couldn't glean from notes."

"You're trying to say that if we started working with those—" Malfoy bit off the comment he'd been about to make at Harry's expression, "We'd have a network set up?"

"Not immediately, I'd guess, but over time, they'd get used to working with us, and that might translate well over to what we do after graduating here." Harry supposed, in between his last bites of corn.

"Where do you dream these things up?" Parkinson raised an eyebrow, "There's no way you're coming up with these ideas yourself!"

Harry agreed, "No, I'm not, but even though I don't like them, and they don't like me, I learned a lot about the world from the Dursleys. If you know the right people, you can get almost anything accomplished. If you know how to treat them, you can get them to do almost anything. If you know how to combine the two, your life is a lot easier. It's how my uncle is as far in the company as he is. He knows just how to butter people up to get what he wants from them. I may not like the way they treat me, but that's because I don't have anything they want, except— Never mind. But the point is that, well, back there, I had a lot of time to think. And people didn't really bother much with watching what they said around me, so I heard a lot of interesting things."

"Apparently, so you think if we, say, approached Longbottom for Herbology homework, it would benefit us in more than just grades?" Nott asked.

"In the long run, sure. I mean, you help him, he helps you, both have a class grade stay the same or improve. He would still likely be hopeless in a class like Potions, but with any luck, after fifth year, he won't be taking it. Then, after graduation, he'd remember that you were helpful, and might be willing to send plant samples your way for a lower price, for your work in say, Potions." Harry explained to make it completely clear.

"And Granger?" Bulstrode peered up from her pickle spears, "How is she supposed to be useful?"

"I'm not going to be fool enough to turn down the chance to search the information in a walking encyclopedia, are you?" Harry asked her straight out.

"Why are you so worried, Potter?" Greengrass poked a fork at him, "It's not like you're having any troubles in class, aside from Defense. Not now that we've told you how to tell shades of green, and the like."

Rolling his eyes, Harry countered, "Well, sure, my grades are just fine, but that doesn't mean I want to be the only one doing well. After all, what kind of network could I build that way?"

"So is everything you're doing here just networking?" Zabini's eyes held a strange gleam to them. One that Harry wasn't sure he wanted to puzzle out just yet.

"Not really, I've got lots of reasons for doing what I am, but the ones you all have heard are the easiest to explain to others." Harry muttered into his glass of pumpkin juice.

"Surely it wouldn't be that difficult to explain that you believe in giving people a first chance," Harry and the rest of the first years looked up abruptly at the voice from the end of their table.

Standing there, looking as though she was not sure whether she wanted to hide or stand on her own two feet, was a bespectacled girl whose hair seemed the same color as wheat. She fussed with her red and gold tie as she stood there, and continued, "It doesn't seem to me like much of that's going on around here."

"What do you want, Gryffindor?" Malfoy hissed, and surprisingly the girl flinched. Blinking, she then met the blonde boy's eyes.

"I'd like to offer my help with this study group," she nodded her head at Harry, "He's got an idea. Traditionally, Gryffindors are pathetic in potions, even without the help of students throwing extraneous ingredients into their cauldrons. At the same time, Ravenclaws are

considered too bookish to do well with classes like Care of Magical Creatures, and Pufflehuffs are rarely skilled at classes other than Herbology. At least, if you go by what everyone seems to believe of one another."

"Seelie," a redhead walked up to her left, "You do realize you just called the Hufflepuffs, Pufflehuffs, don't you?"

"Oh dear," she mumbled, "I did it again."

"That is the biggest reason why she wants to help develop a cross-house study group," the redhead on her right grinned at the Slytherin table, "Her essays do her justice in classes, it's actually casting the spells that gets her into trouble."

"You really don't want to know what happens when you cast Lingardium Weviosa," the girl shuddered, "Believe me, it's worse than the feather fire Finnegan flirted with."

"Did you ever want your pop quiz back?" Harry asked the girl, "The one where he quizzed everyone on his beginning of the year speech."

"Er," she tapped her nose and pondered a moment, "It's not like I can turn it in again, revised for a better grade. Besides, I think he's started using it as kindling by now."

"Well, I hate to break up the start of a beautiful alliance," Fred's grin called him a liar.

"But Seelie has an Herbology exam in five minutes," George smirked as the girl scrambled to the door, whacked into the jamb on her way out, and managed to mutter a spell that had her class supplies traveling in the air behind her as she rubbed her face.

"While we're at it, we have a Defense exam to take," Fred chuckled, "And don't you lot have Potions right now?"

The first years looked at their timepieces, and scrambled to pack and head for class. Taking the opportunity as it was offered, the twins

muttered about a rumor of the Headmaster's absence. The importance of this escaped Harry for much of the class period. He was more focused on the potion he was working on.

Professor Snape had informed each student as they walked in that they were to work as individuals, unless otherwise directed. Knowing that the Longbottom and Ron pairing would only result in an explosion, Harry sat as far away from them as possible, a sentiment echoed by all of the other singled out students. The remaining pairs, Crabbe and Finnegan, Goyle and Thomas, Greengrass and Brown, were resigned to being in the range of any possible explosions as Malfoy, Zabini, Nott, Granger, Patil, Parkinson, and Bulstrode were more able to scramble for perimeter desks as individuals.

Still, being in range of Patil's possible explosions made Harry nervous. He'd had the misfortune of the girl sitting in the row ahead of him, but resigned himself to anything that happened. As he worked on the potion, Harry got the feeling that no two groups, or individuals were working on the same one. As his own potion progressed, the boy kept an eye out on the ones surrounding him, and felt fairly confident in identifying the others' as he went. He even jotted them down when he felt sure enough. Little did he know someone was watching him do this.

Upon finishing his potion, amazed that there hadn't been an explosion yet, Harry turned in his vial. "Mister Potter, finish identifying the rest of the potions assigned, and turn that in as well," the Potions Master smirked at the boy as he muttered this quietly enough that they were the only ones to hear.

As he walked back to his desk, Harry's mind finally reminded him of the twins' comment before class even began. He peered around the classroom, and finished his list, leaving only Crabbe's, Goyle's and Longbottom's potions unnamed, as the three groups didn't seem to be making anything other than a mess. Sighing, he walked to the front of the classroom again, with the remainder of his supplies, and returned them to their places in the cabinets. Some of the ingredients on Crabbe's and Finnegan's desks suggested what the two were supposed to have been completing, and on his way back to his desk, Harry thought he recognized Goyle's and Thomas' assignment.

With his last trip to the front, returning ingredient surpluses, Harry thought he recognized Ron's and Longbottom's potion enough to know that the Ginger Root they were about to add would not react well. Not even stopping to think about the trouble that he'd get into, Harry yanked the root from the redhead's hand, "Why don't you wait for the potion to change colors first?"

"Potter," Ron sniped, "I think we know what we're doing. The instructions say to add the whole Ginger Root when the potion is goldenrod. It's goldenrod now."

"No," Harry blinked, "It's canary yellow." With that, he shrugged, whimpered and walked back to his desk. He could hear Nott, Zabini, and Malfoy snickering, and he knew at least part of it was for his explosion prevention efforts. Just as he jotted down what potion the two Gryffindors had been ruining, the explosion occurred, and Harry sighed again.

"While you were reading the instructions that told you to add the Ginger Root when it became goldenrod in color," Snape hissed, "You obviously overlooked the preceding sentence, which told you to add the ground salamander tail at the same time. Not to mention you completely overlooked the murtlap leaves."

The class packed up and readied to leave, the class period ended, and Harry brought his paper to the front. Quietly as he could, Harry handed it over and asked the professor if he knew where the Headmaster was.

"No I don't," the man grumbled, "If he's not in the school, then—" a pause, "Mister Potter, catch up with your yearmates and inform them they need to be on their way to the Slytherin Common Room. Do the same for the Gryffindors, and any other students you happen upon. Do so quickly, quietly, and above all, don't get involved."

"Sir?" Harry was puzzled.

"I mean it, Potter," the grumbling became growling and the man waved a hand in the air, furthering his dismissal of the child in front of him, "Move! Quickly!"

Resorting to what he'd been told actually had been labeled as the 'Harry Potter Scuttle' in Slytherin house, the boy gathered his things and caught up to the students that had just left the classroom. He relayed the message, and told all of them to continue relaying it as they went to their Common Rooms.

He followed the cluster up to the point where they came even with the Junior Marauders' hidden door, and there he quickly but quietly spoke the password, which had been changed to 'freedom' in honor of the coming break. The twins were already there, and as Harry snuck in, they looked up.

"So?" Fred asked.

Harry grabbed supplies, "Snape ordered me to send everyone to their Common Rooms, but we need to sneak up to the hallway to clear out the traps, make it easier for the professors to get through."

"Righty then," George also grabbed some supplies, "We at least know Quirrell has something to do with it, he never showed for the exam."

"So he and whoever else has had roughly the entire class time to work on the deterrents the professors created. After getting through our traps." Fred continued.

Harry finished the chain of thought, "So there might not be much left intact. Maybe we can talk the professors into letting us leave some of our untested stuff to catch him up when he leaves."

Three grins accompanied that statement. Though the boys knew that they'd more likely put Gryffindor further out of the running for the House cup, and leave Slytherin actually possibly losing it to Ravenclaw, they were going to do what they could to help. Harry because he knew the twins would go anyway. The twins, because

they figured, Gryffindor was out of the running, why worry about points at this time? Besides, it sounded interesting.

As the trio reached the off-limits corridor, they noticed the blasted open door, and the rather disturbing lack of sound. No growling, snarling or barking, just a faint melody wafting from the room. Looking at each other, they inspected the passage for any remnants of their traps.

Footsteps alerted the boys to the approaching professors, and they all flinched mightily. It was one thing to know that if they got caught they'd be in it deep, it was another entirely to actually get caught. Particularly by these two professors. At least it cleared their names from the list of suspects, Hermione would be glad. McGonagall had nothing to do with the problem.

"What do you three think you're doing here?" she snapped.

Fred for once, seemed hesitant, "We were checking on the traps set on the door."

"There aren't any left intact, so we were thinking of asking permission to leave some for whoever comes back out." George added.

"Absolutely not!" she hissed, sounding remarkably like a cat. Wait, that was her animagus form, Harry reminded himself, so no wonder, "By rights you three could be expelled for even being here!"

Fred collected enough nerve to further scare the other two boys, "We were under the impression that the only consequence of being here was death. The Headmaster said so himself at the Welcoming Feast. 'On pain of death.' Nothing about detentions, point loss, expulsion, lines to write, or anything other than death."

Heaving a deep sigh, the woman stalked forward, "Fine, if you're going to be difficult about it, we'll make use of your assistance in keeping the Cerberus in line. I presume at least one of you knows a charm to play music?"

Grinning, George cast the spell as the small group walked in the room. Harry privately thought something strange was going on, as McGonagall didn't seem the sort to let children get involved in anything to do with adults, and this was definitely an adult situation. It made him wonder if there were other things going on.

Snape smirked at the small boy as he passed. Both professors quickly surveyed the room, and saw the enchanted harp that had just stopped playing. They looked at each other and nodded.

"Weasley," Harry never understood how the man could use just their surname and manage to speak to just one twin at a time, but Snape did so even at this time, "Keep that song going until we either return, or yell up to you to run. If we yell for you to run, do so. Do not cast traps, do not look back, and most certainly, do not come back. You will be killed, and if you're lucky, it will just be the dog that does so. Is this understood?"

The three boys nodded, and resolved to keep that charm going for as long as possible. The two adults walked to the trap door, and suddenly, Professor McGonagall stiffened. Harry just barely heard her mutter about points in the negatives by the end of this fiasco, and then both adults were waving at him and Fred.

"We've got a slight hitch in our plans," McGonagall muttered, rubbing her temples a bit, "There are students down there. If you listen, you can just hear one of them yelling."

Standing that close to the trap door, they actually could, and both boys looked back up into their professors' faces. The worry even in the Potions Master's eyes didn't speak well of the situation.

Harry offered, "Ma'am, if you can get to them and levitate them to us, we can get them from the door way. We might even be able to get them to the Infirmary."

Nodding, McGonagall added, "Poppy is already on her way. So if either of you know any first aid, that would be better than trying to rush them to her. The other professors are also on their way, so if they arrive in time, one of them can take over the music charm."

"Should we be that fortunate," Snape didn't seem to believe they would, "the three of you, and any students back up here from below that are capable, will return to your Common Rooms, will remain silent concerning this, and any theories you have, and will prepare for the punishments you will face for interfering in this."

"Yes sir," Fred nodded at both adults as he said this, and Harry nodded as well, though he was looking down the hole. He thought he recognized one of the voices.

"Sir," Harry hesitated, "I think I might know at least one of the people down there."

"I can almost guarantee it is more foolish members of my House, Mister Potter," McGonagall sighed, "Most likely to be some combination of Ronald, Mister Thomas, Mister Finnegan, and perhaps even Mister Longbottom."

"Mercy upon us if Longbottom's involved," Snape muttered, "But we still need to get down there. Weasley, you will take over any levitation charms if we have an unconscious or injured student to send up. Mister Potter, if the student is able to move under their own power, merely pull them from the hole, and cast a quick *lumos* to inform us when said student is clear."

"Yes sir," Harry and Fred chimed and nodded, in unison. Even through the worry, Harry grinned a bit at the muttered 'triplets' from both professors.

With that, the two adults levitated themselves down the passage, and the boys stood guard. After a bit, Fred asked to be relieved of the charm, his arms were getting tired, and he was filled in on the instructions left by the adults. Shortly after the twins switched, the boys noticed a shape at the bottom of the trapdoor. With no spells flying their way, the boys felt it was safe enough to poke their faces over the top, and they saw McGonagall. She nodded, and then spoke to the smaller shape standing near her. The shape was shivering, but nodded back to her, as she cast the levitation charm. The Weasley twin and Harry readied themselves for the person on their way up to

them, and saw Thomas as he cleared the doorway. When it was safe, Harry pulled him from over the hole, and Fred let the Transfiguration professor know it was clear.

As soon as the charm was removed, Thomas stuttered about a plant they'd only gotten through when their fear froze them solid, and a door with hundreds of keys. At being asked, he said he'd not been more than scratched by the keys as they dashed through the door on the other side of them, and was told to bandage that up and head to Gryffindor Tower and to stay put. Harry was amazed that he did so without argument.

A minute or two after Thomas left, the two boys spotted Professor Snape at the bottom of the tunnel. He nodded as he saw he had their attention, and began levitating someone up. Both boys were relieved to see that the individual was awake, though Finnegan seemed to have been silenced. Harry didn't see how he could appear to be screaming without noise otherwise.

Once he was clear, the boys gave the man standing at the bottom the signal, and he waved at them to move from the trapdoor. They pulled the rather panicky Irish boy away from the door, and Fred continued to tug him away from the three-headed dog to help him calm down, as Professor Snape levitated himself up. He nodded to the four boys, and indicated that they should remain just a bit longer.

Peering down the trapdoor, he waved, and Harry could see another student being lifted up. This one was not awake, and seemed to have a head injury. The squeaky noise the twins made told Harry a second before he recognized the red hair who it was, and he moved forward to help Snape stabilize the first year. Pulling his robe off, leaving him in shirt and jeans, Harry folded it up to use as a pillow for the boy when he was set on the ground.

Looking over at them, Harry took over the music charm so the twins could help fuss over their brother. Shortly after the youngest redhead was settled on the ground, both professors were back up in the room with the sleeping Cerberus, and Harry looked nervously at the trapdoor.

"We never saw anyone other than these three," Snape muttered under his breath, "Which means that the culprit must have made it past all of the traps."

"That's not as bad as it sounds," McGonagall tried to diffuse the dark mood, "Albus' defense is meant to trap whomever would be after the object. We shouldn't have a problem if we can get the children out of the room, and the other professors here to meet him when he gives up."

With a snort, Snape snapped his gaze to the muted boy, "Finnegan, you and Thomas will scrub cauldrons until the train leaves with you on it. I see no point in subtracting points from Gryffindor, as your House is already close enough to the negatives from your actions less than a month ago. Thus, when you return to school, consider your first month back to be mine for detentions. This will not happen again, do you hear me?"

Rather than contradict the man, McGonagall nodded, "I shall deal with Misters Weasley, all three. I suppose you'll take on Mister Potter's detentions as well?"

"Gladly," the drawl sent a shiver down Finnegan's back, and Harry knew that by the time that month of detentions next year was over, he'd be able to identify a lot more potions by their color and residues. Silently, he resigned himself to being good friends with the scrubbing brush and the cauldron soap.

"Mister Finnegan, Mister Potter, if you would—" Professor McGonagall's instructions were interrupted by the arrival of the nurse, and Madam Pomfrey hustled straight to the injured student.

"Oh my," she mumbled to herself, "Well, we've got a mild concussion at the least here, but fortunately, his spine is intact, so we can put him safely on a stretcher and levitate him to the Infirmary. I crossed Thomas on my way here, and sent him there. Mister Finnegan, if you would please come with me, we'll have you fixed up in no time at all."

Though the nurse was quite capable of levitating the magically conjured stretcher, the twins were having none of that. The solemnity

of their faces reassured her that her comatose patient would be safe, even with his brothers providing the locomotive power for the device. Harry waited for the five of them to leave the room, and was just about to leave himself, when the rest of the professors finally arrived.

"Ah," Flitwick seemed tense, and for once, Harry was nervous around the tiny man. Rather than the jovial nature he usually displayed, this version of Flitwick was frighteningly similar to the usual attitude of McGonagall and Snape.

Sprout was more serious as well, but she wasn't nearly as intimidating as the other three Heads of House. Hooch was always on the intimidating side, like Professor Snape, but at this time, she was downright frightening. Briefly, he wondered why she was involved, but was content to do so as he left the room. When Hooch took over the music charm, he made to do just that.

A hand on his shoulder kept Harry in the room for a bit longer. Professor Snape was looking down at him with a strange expression on his face. As Harry looked up, he explained, "It would be best if you headed for the Headmaster's office at this point, Mister Potter. You might be able to catch him as he returns from his errand. If you see him, inform him of our whereabouts. If you see any students along the way, instruct them as to where they should be, or just remember their name, and report it to me when I return to fetch you."

"Yes sir," Harry turned again to leave, but doubled over in pain as it felt like something lanced through his skull.

Though the boy wasn't aware of it, the professors spent a split second of worry over him, then whirled to the figure levitating themselves into the room. Harry's head was bursting with such pain that he didn't understand the arguing of the adults, but he was vaguely aware of someone standing near him. Hooch had remained at his side, continuing the music charm to keep Fluffy asleep. When the others began shooting spells at each other, she erected a wall of silence in front of the Cerberus, and a strong shield in front of herself and the child. He was incapacitated, but she didn't dare leave to take him to Pomfrey, not until the Headmaster showed.

If he'd been able to look up, Harry would have been amazed at how well Quirrell was holding up against Fliwitck, Snape, McGonagall, and Sprout. He was finally able to look up when the pain lessened a bit. The sight that met his eyes at that point made him wish the pain hadn't let up. Sprout had just been flung against a wall, barely missing the sleeping three-headed dog, and McGonagall and Snape were both struggling to stand back up from the same hex. Flitwick was flinging curses, jinxes and hexes quick as he could, but even still, Quirrell- and Harry was happy to be right- was dodging and countering them as though it were child's play. After a second, Harry was even more amazed as it turned out that Quirrell was facing the wrong way the entire time.

Not sure why the pain had lessened, Harry got Madam Hooch's attention and motioned towards the door. She nodded and as the small boy turned for the door one last time, he was quite shocked, even flabbergasted, to find himself flying in the wrong direction. Harry was going to look up the Summoning spell when he got the chance, he swore to himself. He wanted to know how in the world it could summon people.

This thought was interrupted by a return of the screaming pain, but worse even than it had been before. A hissing sound issued from the boy's arms where Quirrell, now facing the right way, was holding him still.

Speaking through the pain, Quirrell threatened the others, "This boy and I will be returning to the Mirror, where he will retrieve the Stone for me. You all will cower here as you wait for my return. If you survive, have a nice time collecting his corpse." Taking a step back at this point, the man dragged the boy back towards the trap door.

Though the pain was nearly shutting his brain down, Harry knew he really didn't want to go down the hole. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he wondered how the professor could stand it. The hissing began to smell of burnt flesh, and Harry realized that there was actually something burning. Managing to squirm enough to get an arm free, he realized he wasn't the one burning, not quite. A hand on his neck made the boy yelp and nearly shrill like a girl when faced

with a rat on the ground. His fear was not lessened any by the sudden growl that issued from behind them.

When the hand dropped from his neck, Harry quickly turned and looked over Quirrell's shoulder. Catching a glimpse of the rotting mass on the back of the man's skull, Harry felt his lunch wishing imminent greetings to the floor at his feet. Even that thought was silenced when he realized that the growling came from the now awakened Fluffy. Said three-headed dog drooled at the food standing before it.

Harry took a step back, and hoped that the dog would go for the morsel closer, rather than the younger one. Quirrell reached for the boy again, as said child fell another step back. At the same time, the creature snapped forward with one of its heads. Flinching, falling and not quite sure why he didn't close his eyes, Harry saw the head, sharp teeth included, close the distance between the adult and itself.

Feeling the rushing movement of a Summoning Charm cast on himself again, Harry was amazed that the second and third heads hadn't made a snatch for him as he flew out of their range. Instead, all three heads seemed preoccupied with the figure in front of them. The bloody mess had collapsed, and it seemed as if the teeth in all three mouths had blood and other bits dripping from them. Harry's lunch started its preliminaries of greeting the floor again, as the adults crowded around him.

"Mister Potter!" Professor Snape's voice suddenly pierced the fog his mind had collapsed into, and Harry's gaze snapped to meet the man's black eyes.

With the images of Quirrell's death replaying briefly through his mind, Harry wondered at the burning sensation caused by the man's touch. When Snape suddenly looked away, Harry turned his head to see what the adult was looking at.

Headmaster Dumbledore had returned, and with a sad look on his face, was looking at the mess Fluffy had left. As if feeling the weight of the gazes upon him, he turned to the cluster to his left.

"Are you well, Harry, my boy?" the worry seemed genuine in the Headmaster's voice and eyes, but Harry couldn't concentrate on it. He saw the hands on his arms again, felt the hissing and slight burning that had accompanied it, and reviewed yet again, the biting of the Cerberus upon the form of Quirrell. Strangely, with this third viewing, Harry actually saw the strange gas released upon the teeth closing in upon the body. One more time, his stomach rebelled, and this time, its rebellion was successful. The boy doubled over, and retched out the contents of his stomach, as the professors all scattered back a step or three.

When his stomach had emptied itself to its content, the boy peered up at the adults. For a few seconds, he saw the sadness in their eyes, but that didn't last long. As he heard the Headmaster repeat his question, the boy felt the muscles of his body relax, and saw black tunnels surround him until he saw no more.

I feel like I should be singing the theme to 'The Neverending Story.' I keep having to break chapters up, and what was originally going to be ten chapters long is now fifteen. Uh, forgive me for bringing Seelie back in, but I figure, you ought to get used to her now, she is the Gryffie Seeker after all. You will be seeing more of her. She really is interested in helping with the study group. But she really is a jinx too.

Furthermore, I'm sorry about the weird way the chapter ends. I had always planned for Quirrell to die at the end, but the fact was, I wasn't sure, until I typed it up, that Harry would have the misfortune of actually seeing Q-man's death. And, sorry, it's on the gory side. It's actually worse than when I first typed this chapter. Like I said at the beginning, if I don't get gorier than this, the story will stay 'T' rated. However, if I find too many more gore-ified messes popping up, I'll change the rating to 'M,' unless I actually research other 'T' stories and find them gorier than me.

I made a mental note to add a new chapter when I got 250 reviews. I posted the last chapter and couldn't get online the next day. So, sorry it's a day late, but here's your reward for letting me know you liked the last chapter better than I did. Hope this one doesn't scare you all off. And please, if you feel this bumps the rating, tell me first, I'll change it right off.

Having had very few opportunities to see the inside of the Infirmary, Harry was understandably confused when he woke to the sterile, white and off-white walls of said chambers. Blinking a few times, he looked around to see someone sitting up in a bed not far off. Sitting up himself, Harry searched around for his glasses, and perched them on his nose. Looking further, Harry saw the pile of candy surrounding the redhead and the pile of his own to the left side of his bed. Thinking he could just leave the pile of sweets to the red-haired boy, he began mustering up the energy to climb out of the bed.

His efforts were interrupted by the appearance of the nurse, who hustled over to the beds quicker than the boy could move off the surface.

"Mister Potter," she admonished, "I would appreciate it if you would remain on the bed until I can ascertain whether or not there was any lasting damage."

"From what?" Harry blinked, confused.

Walking into the Infirmary, the Headmaster clarified, "By all accounts, my boy, you were suffering under a great deal of pain. It is generally considered a bad thing to be subjected to pain at all, much less for the prolonged period of time you appeared to have endured."

"Uhm," the boy mumbled, "What about Ron?"

"He suffered a simple concussion, and is nearly ready to leave," Madam Pomfrey diagnosed, "It seems you have recovered well enough yourself, Mister Potter, so feel free to gather the sweets your fellow students purloined from Hogwarts' kitchens and go. Tomorrow is the Leaving Feast, and I expect that if either of you feel the need, you will return immediately."

Both boys nodded quickly, and gathered the candy, Harry managed to leave with fewer sugar-filled delights than the redhead, as he wasn't sure it would benefit him much to have them. He did, after all, want to get some sleep that night. On his way to the Slytherin Common Room, Harry wondered what it would hurt to ask permission to stay at Hogwarts for the summer even. He didn't remember

reading about anyone ever doing so in the school's history book, but neither did he recall any rules forbidding it.

As he reached the door leading to Professor Snape's office, the portrait guarding it swung open, and the Potions Master stepped through. He looked up to spot the boy approaching his door, and raised an eyebrow, "Did you need something Mister Potter? Or were you intending to get a head start on those detentions?"

Suddenly feeling his nerve drain away, Harry nearly whirled around and said 'never mind.' He knew, though, that the adult wouldn't let him get away with that, so he plowed on through to ask, "Sir, do you think there's any way I could stay here for the summer?"

With a deep sigh, the pitch black eyes slid towards a far off wall, "There are not the facilities for such a thing. The school undergoes a hibernation period, during the summer, so as to not stretch the ambient wards overmuch. Having a child in the school year round would make this impossible."

Nodding sadly, Harry asked the second half of the question, "Is there anywhere I could stay that wouldn't be the Dursley's?"

"If you had asked that question earlier in the year," Snape nearly muttered to himself, "I'm sure we could have worked something out, if your reasons for wanting to not return were along the lines of feeling endangered, unwanted, or actually being abused. Otherwise, there is nothing to be done. And at this point in the year, we can only file the request as a complaint concerning your lodgings, to keep in mind for next year."

"Thank you sir," Harry nodded to the man in gratitude, even though nothing was going to change. Then, the boy turned towards his Common Room and scrambled into bed.

The next morning, after Harry woke and changed, he headed for the Great Hall, even before the rest of his roommates were awake. He sat, and had made it through roughly half a plate of scrambled eggs when the rest of the students began trudging in.

The older students sat proudly under the green and silver banners, and the younger ones were quickly filled in on what it meant. By the time everyone had settled in and eaten their fill, everyone knew that Slytherin had won the House cup. Even the Potions Master's usual poker face was gone, replaced with a quiet smirk.

When all of the students seemed to have finished with their food, the Headmaster stood and drew everyone's attention to himself.

"I would like to congratulate you all on a year well spent," he began, "and I wish you the best for your summer time efforts to clear your brains of the stuffing we have performed upon them. It is my understanding that it is time to award the House cup. As they stand now, the Houses have the following points. Gryffindor is in fourth place, with three hundred and twelve points. Third place goes to Hufflepuff with three hundred and fifty-two points, and second to Ravenclaw with four hundred and twenty-six points. This means, that Slytherin, with four hundred and seventy-two points, wins the cup."

The rest of Harry's House began to cheer, and the other three made a polite attempt at congratulatory clapping. Harry, while still happy, couldn't help but wonder why the Headmaster was still standing. Seeing the man wave his hands gently in the air made the boy's stomach sink.

"I do believe, however," Professor Dumbledore spoke when the noise died down, "That in light of recent events, there are more points in need of awarding."

This announcement caused the whole school to still, and the expression dropped right off of Professor Snape's face.

Continuing without missing a beat, the Headmaster enumerated his points to award, "I award forty points to Mister Dean Thomas for bravely standing guard in a dire situation."

The Gryffindors perked up a little, but were still puzzled as to what good a mere fifty points would do for their House.

"To Mister Seamus Finnegan," the Headmaster had a benevolent smile upon his face, "I award forty points for acting as a sound guide in times of trouble."

Thomas and Finnegan both had perplexed looks on their faces, and Ron seemed like he was adding something particularly complicated in his head. A sudden thought occurred to Harry, and his stomach sank even further.

"Mister Ronald Weasley earned forty points for his excellent game of chess, played under duress," the Headmaster had to be ignoring the indignant expression on Snape's face, and the flabbergasted expressions on the rest of the professors'.

"For holding a rather superb music charm, I award Mister George Weasley thirty points."

Many of the Slytherins were slumping, bad posture rules ignored. Harry was hoping that the Headmaster was nearly done. Malfoy seemed to be memorizing the banners above the Gryffindors, as though he thought they might be changing in aspects soon.

"Mister Harry Potter wins thirty points for his efforts in barring entrance to sensitive areas," Dumbledore's eyes shone brightly to anyone actually looking. "To Mister Fred Weasley," Dumbledore added, "I award thirty points, for his quick thinking and actions to prevent sensitive materials from falling in the wrong hands."

The whispering that rumbled through the Great Hall indicated to all of the mathematically inclined, that the Gryffindors had been caught up to the Slytherins with this set of declarations. The feeling in the pit of his stomach told Harry that the Headmaster still wasn't done, and the expression lacking on Professor Snape's face spoke of his own realization in that regard

"For such excellent information gathering skills, I award ten points to Miss Hermione Granger," At this point, the whole room erupted.

The sinking feeling he'd been suffering from throughout the speech suddenly transformed into a heavy stone in his stomach, and Harry

felt a sourness develop in his mouth. He got the feeling that the five Gryffindor boys were going to be exempted from their detentions next year, and that this was only the beginning of a situation Harry already hated.

Hot on the heels of this epiphany, Harry met the eyes of the older Slytherins and saw that they had seen it coming. Evidently, something in his gaze rang to them and each of the older students whose gaze he met gave him a little nod. That was all he needed to know to have confirmed that they had suffered similar blindfold removal moments. With a deep sigh, the smallish boy began paying attention to the Hall again, and noticed that the banners had gone from green and silver to red and gold, and the cheering had finally died down.

The students were dismissed to their rooms to finish packing, and to speak their farewells, and Harry found himself pulled aside by the Quidditch team.

"Potter," Bletchley had an expression between sympathy and an 'I-told-you-so' that set Harry's nerves on edge. He knew more was coming to make the situation worse, "We wanted to know if you were still going to try out for the Seeker position next year."

"Are you telling me not to bother?" Harry peered up at them.

"If you don't take the Seeker position," Flint shrugged, "We'll just continue playing as we always have. No point in changing ourselves when they won't ever."

"All this year, when you've said, 'I'll think on it,' you all were really meaning, 'you've yet to see what we've seen,' didn't you?" Harry's gaze caught Higgs', and the older boy flinched at the open betrayal in the green eyes.

"You're not going to change the world just by wanting it to happen," Bole shook his head, "We hoped you might have been able to open their eyes, but we weren't going to hold our breath."

"If I come back next year," Harry looked at them all, "And show you all what I can about Muggles, so that you can make informed opinions to like or dislike them, will you at least take the time to learn the information?"

"Not going to try and make us like them, are you?" Warrington spoke up, a rarity for him, "I mean, I don't care if you tell us about the Muggle world in an effort to educate us. If you're going to try and turn us into Muggle lovers, though, I wouldn't bother."

"No," Harry shook his head, "I'm trying to show you enough of the Muggle world so that if you continue to despise them, you'll at least know what exactly you're despising them for. Instead of hating them simply for not having a magical pedigree that traces back thousands of years, you can hate them for driving on the wrong side of the road, or for wearing gaudy jewelry."

"Those are pretty stupid reasons to hate a person," Derrick rolled his wand across his palm in a restless manner.

"So's not bothering to meet any Muggles but hating them for not having fifteen times great grandparents all the way down to their parents who use magic," Harry snorted, "At least if I hate Muggles, it's because I've been around them to personally find things to dislike."

"So your crusade is changing from getting the world to like us to being for us to like the Muggles," Flint began.

"My crusade was for everyone to open their eyes to the differences of the people around them," Harry grumbled, "I've spent most of my life where people only see what they expect to, and then learned that magic actually exists. Then when I came here, I hoped that it would be different, only to find it isn't. Can you really blame me for wanting to change that?"

"No," Pucey, one of the graduating seventh years smirked, "We don't blame you for wanting that. Or even trying to make it happen. After all, that's probably what got you Sorted into Slytherin. It's what got most

of us here. We wanted to change the world."

"Pity the world's better at changing us than we are it," Higgs nodded, "Just keep in mind, Potter. You can't expect change to happen, not of that scale, in a day, a week, a month, or even just a year. This crusade of yours could take your whole life."

"I like the idea of this life goal better than the one that was assigned to me," Harry moved his hair off his forehead and the whole group chuckled. They then scattered to their separate floors, and gathered their belongings.

On the train ride back, Harry sat in a compartment with Ravenclaws, as the twins were quite happily catching up with their other friend Lee Jordan. Not begrudging them the friend from their own House, Harry plotted ways of bringing things to Hogwarts to introduce to his fellow Slytherins in an effort to give them a real choice in regards to the non-magical inhabitants of the world. In between those thoughts, he wondered if Hermione had been reporting to Dumbledore the entire time she'd been 'helping' Fred, George, and Harry.

By the time the train reached King's Cross Station, Harry had managed at least a rough draft of his Transfiguration and Herbology essays, and had gotten enough notes to feel comfortable in starting a draft for his History class. As he packed his books back up, he realized he didn't even have his Defense book out of his bags, and wondered what the professor had assigned for the summer. He couldn't remember what essay he was supposed to write, or how long it was to be. For that matter, he couldn't rightly remember the man's name, though his mind kept stuttering and telling him it had something to do with the class.

Finally, he shrugged, and as the students disembarked, Harry decided to work on all of the other essays first, and when they were done, he'd send a letter asking what the assignment had been. After collecting Hedwig in her cage, and his school trunk, Harry began looking out for his uncle. Hoping that this summer wouldn't be too unbearable, the boy sighed as he finally spotted the long neck of his aunt.

Approaching them, Harry noticed a few Slytherin Housemates keeping an eye on the trio of Muggles, and resigned himself to introducing them to his relatives. He was however, surprised when no such thin happened. This might have been in part, due to the fact that Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia swept Dudley and Harry through the station as quickly as possible once they knew they actually had to take Harry with them.

After shoving his trunk into the back of the car, Harry climbed gingerly into the new car, amidst his uncle growling about 'not getting any of his freakishness all over' or 'he'd be sorry.'

Short Chapter signals the end of his first year at Hogwarts. I'm working on his second, and there could start to be enough variance from the books that I have to come to terms with my own plot that sits over all of the mini ones of the books. Eh, don't kill me for the points fiasco or the lack of housing change, there are things in motion for that. Both that he's 'accidentally' set in motion, and that will occur later.

I'm currently about to start chapter five of his second year, and still haven't quite gotten him to Hogwarts. If that doesn't tell you how long the next year will be, join the club, I'm your captain, and I hope you enjoy the ride. There will be a slight delay as I take a bit of a break, hopefully no more than two weeks, to try and get the majority of the chapters written in order to have a better idea of what the whoot will happen. I have an outline, but there are details in it that I don't like. So, I will try to update next by Oct 10 at the latest. I'm hoping for the third, but I felt I should give myself a decent window in case classes slam me with work. Of course, feel free to poke me with a stick if a month or two goes by and no new chappies. Just... please, don't poke me to death, yeah? That'll defeat the purpose of the whole thing, I think. Oh, and does anyone know for sure if Oliver Wood is Pureblood, Muggleborn or what? I have a detail in a chapter that kind of relies on the answer to that.

After the first two weeks of the break, Harry was ready to allow himself to be committed to an asylum. The Dursleys had taken his trunk, locked it in the cupboard, and refused to allow him access. They also had installed a number of locks onto the door of the room he was borrowing from Dudley's broken toys. He was told he'd be allowed out to cook, to wash, and on rare occasions when the Dursley's were about to entertain, and needed a quick cleaning of the house. Otherwise, he was going to be locked into the room, with not even homework to occupy himself.

As for Hedwig, Vernon had taken her cage, with a sour look, and disappeared with her. Harry hoped he'd been kind enough to leave her with something to eat, but he wasn't going to hold his breath. Thus, it was no surprise that Harry never noticed the lack of letters no one had ever promised to send.

As the second week of seclusion came to a close, however, Harry had had enough, and his shamefully Gryffindor side burst out with a vengeance. Upon being released by Petunia to cook breakfast for the rest of the family, Harry stalked downstairs and stood in the kitchen. Rather than heading for the stove to cook the pan of bacon for Dudley and Vernon apiece, or to the icebox to retrieve the dozen eggs the two other males would consume for the meal, Harry met his Uncle's gaze and simply stood.

"Well boy, what are you waiting for, an embossed invitation?" Chuckling at his own joke, Vernon gestured to the stove, "We aren't just sitting here for our health, you know."

While Dudley cackled and Petunia preened, Harry cocked his head sideways and took a chance, "You want me out of this house as soon as possible, right?"

"What a fool question that is, boy. We wish you'd never been in it in the first place." the man snorted.

"Then what's the point of preventing me from doing my school work?" Harry took a step back towards the stove at the menacing expression on his uncle's face, even as his cousin whipped out the rather large

and solid stick from his school to whack him with.

"We don't want your freakishness to contaminate our house any more than it already has," Petunia sniffed.

"Why not look at it this way," Harry offered, as he finally turned towards the stove, hoping to minimize the damage even a little, "if you let me work on my schoolwork, I can get it done before I return. If I get it done before returning, then my grades will get higher. If my grades are higher, I might be able to convince one of the Wizarding families to take me in. If I can do that, you can tell the neighbors that your wild nephew attending Saint Brutus' finally ran off and got himself put under house arrest or something and won't be coming back for ages, if ever."

"And what's to stop you from using any of that mumbo jumbo on us in the meantime?" the heavy man, amazingly enough to Harry, seemed to be actually considering this.

"I can't very well convince a Wizarding family that I would be a good addition to their household if I've got a record for picking on my relatives, now could I?" Harry hoped this would help, not hinder his goal, "Besides, if I spend all day working on assignments, I figure I should be able to tire myself out enough to not do anything, except on accident, at least."

The silence was almost worse than the comments they usually made. Wincing internally, Harry continued to fry the bacon. One half of the pan was ready to turn, as Uncle Vernon liked his bacon just to the point of crispy. The other half, what he'd give to his cousin, wasn't quite done yet. Dudley liked his bacon to crunch with each bite. Harry would never say, but he personally thought it sounded like the bigger boy was breaking his teeth with every mouthful.

Turning the latter half of the pan of bacon, and quickly switching the former to a plate with a paper napkin over top to drain the grease, Harry's nervousness climbed a notch at the silence. Not even Dudley was speaking, and the other boy could usually be counted on for at least a whine of 'aren't you ready yet,' every thirty seconds or so.

Trying not to hunch too badly, Harry quickly loaded the cleared half of the pan with the second portion for his uncle, and turned with the plate to place it in front of the man.

The expressions that greeted him as he did so didn't provide any comfort. It seemed they were all flummoxed at the idea he'd suggested, and Harry prepared himself for a sound rejection and an early locking away for daring, but resolved to at least get them through breakfast so they couldn't complain about that.

Finally, as Dudley's half of the pan reached readiness, the trio at the table began muttering. Not trying too hard to hear, Harry still caught mentions of, 'couldn't be that lucky,' 'what we'll have to do in return,' and 'that freak Headmaster of the freak school wouldn't let it happen.'

When his cousin's bacon was ready, Harry gave it the same treatment as his Uncle's, and reloaded the pan again. Waiting a bit to turn it over to the other boy, as Dudley didn't like his bacon that hot, thank you, Harry turned the second portion of Vernon's bacon, and at the same time tried to avoid the grease spatters.

The muttering was also starting to increase in volume, as apparently, Dudley and Vernon were arguing about something. Frankly, the dark-haired boy was amazed the argument had even happened, as his parents almost always caved in to what Dudley wanted. The only other time Harry could remember had resulted in Harry's room assignment change last year.

When he brought the bacon to his cousin, the muttering stopped abruptly, and the three looked at him as though they had forgotten he was even there. Harry found this rather funny, as he'd been the impetus for this particular conversation in the first place.

While he cooked, the conversation wavered between hisses that were just indistinct enough that Harry couldn't understand them, and mutterings that he did. It seemed to the boy that his Uncle and cousin were all for getting him out of the house as soon as possible, even if it meant dealing with a little strangeness. After all, a little now would preclude the need for longer exposure, right?

His Aunt, however seemed rather stuck on the thought that someone wouldn't allow it.

Finally, after the trips back to the table that delivered both of the second halves of the bacon to the males in the house, and the three strips to his Aunt. And after the set that delivered the eggs over easy to everyone else, and the jaunts to the refrigerator to replenish milk and water, the brunet felt it was time to return to the conversation. On a paper plate, he gathered the strip of burnt bacon he was allowed, and the scrambled eggs they encouraged him to eat. He also got a small plastic glass of water and set them on the counter, not far from the now cooling stove.

"Any decisions made?" Harry interjected between his Aunt's and his cousin's words.

"About how long do you think this will take?" Vernon raised an eyebrow, "You know, to get you taught up enough that you can leave the house?"

"I'm not sure, but I figure that's what the schoolwork's for. To give me some more information about the whole thing." Shrugging, Harry set his plate in the trash, as he gathered the utensils he'd used to cook and put those into the sink, "If I can get to a source of information in the- Other world, I can research the process, I think, and at least get it started."

"So, this weekend, we take you to where to get this information?" Vernon demanded as the boy took the plates from the table and set them in the sink as well.

Starting the water in the sink now, before it got full, Harry also added soap, then turned around once more. Slightly puzzled himself, now Harry wondered about Hedwig. "Well, I could either send a letter with Hedwig, or I can try to find something at a library in London. If it's a big enough library, there might even be a section in it about this, or someone to tell me more themselves." Harry finished collecting the dishes and as his relatives got ready to start their days, he started the dishes.

"That ruddy owl." the heavy man grumbled indistinctly to himself, then spoke up, "Fine. You'll send a letter to one of the other freaks, and we'll wait for a response. When that happens, we'll use that information to get you topics to look under in a library. You get this figured out and we'll get you taught up so that one of those families will want to take you off our hands. Why someone would actually want you, I'll never fathom, you're an awful waste of space, but if they're that stupid, who am I to argue?"

With that, the man gathered his suitcase for work, and walked out the door. Not far behind him, Dudley called out about how he was going to the park to hang out with his friends. Finishing the dishes, Harry was surprised that his aunt hadn't immediately ushered him to the smallest room. Instead, she pointed at one of the chairs.

"I'll disinfect it later, but right now, you and I need to talk." She sat back down as Harry gingerly perched on the edge of the indicated chair. "You don't really think that your Headmaster will allow this, will you?"

"I don't know," Harry shook his head as he answered, "That was one of the things I wanted to investigate. I can't help but think that if you all are my guardians, he doesn't have a say in it."

"He had a reason for putting you with us in the first place, you know." Harry was amazed even more as she fidgeted. His aunt was known for being able to remain still as a statue, yet she was repeatedly smoothing the front of her dress down her knees. "I don't know how many times we've wanted to drop you off at an orphanage, and mysteriously, we'd get a letter reassuring us that it would be for the best to keep you. It would be safest, and healthiest for all concerned. That we should look past the hurt caused by foolish children and prove we're stronger than they thought. I frankly, fail to see why any of that has anything to do with raising a child such as you, trouble that you are."

"I don't see it either." Harry was puzzled. Some of those 'reassurances' sounded like the philosophical statements he'd heard the accelerated students bandy about in the local school. Beginning to wonder if those conversations he'd overheard had been staged, he

seriously wondered what they could have to do with him staying at Number four Privet Drive. "Why exactly do you hate magic, Aunt Petunia?"

"That's none of your business!" she hissed and the truce was suddenly recalled. She stood and motioned for the boy to follow her. Leading him back to his room, she told him to stay put. As she left, she pulled a key from her pocket and said she'd return with the owl. "You'd better send that letter quickly, boy, so we can get this worked out. I'll also bring up some of your books, and you can work on that. We don't want you dreaming up any more impertinent questions."

More than a little afraid that he'd ruined his chances all together of getting out of there sooner, Harry dug up some scratch paper and a pen, and scribbled out a letter to the twins. He asked if there were rules about a child being adopted, fostered, or taken in from the Muggle world to the Wizarding one. He also asked if there was any way to find out who his guardians were. Figuring that having a father in the Ministry would ensure the two knew something, Harry felt safe sending them a message. He then shrugged, as he remembered that Malfoy also had a parent in the Ministry, and that it shouldn't hurt to ask him too.

As his aunt brought up the cage with Hedwig in it, the small boy wrapped up the first letter and tied it off. He then addressed it to the twins, and started in on the second one, the one to the Malfoys. He made sure that the paper was cleaner, neater, less wrinkly, and most of all, that his handwriting was as neat as he could get it. By the time he'd finished penning the second one, his books had been brought up.

"Well?" Petunia hissed as she dropped the Transfiguration, Potions, and Charms texts on his bed, "Haven't you finished yet?"

"I remembered someone else who might have information to share, so I'm writing another one. I'll send both with Hedwig, and that will hopefully keep her both out of here longer, and will also keep her out from under your noses for a while longer." Harry finished the second letter, and after it received the same treatment as the first, he opened his owl's cage and tied them to one leg each. "The one on your left leg should go to the Weasleys, and the one on the right goes to the

Malfoys. Try to keep them from becoming confused and taking the wrong letters. Take your time, enjoy the trip and the exercise, and I'll see you when you return, okay?"

The owl flew off as his aunt shuddered, "At least the beast is able to take off for flight, giving us freedom from its filth."

As he was settling into the homework assignments he could work on, Harry took note of all he could regarding guardianship. Which wasn't much, but anything was better than what he had at this point. He knew how to behave in 'noble' company thanks to prior research and his year mates, and that thought made him wonder why his other books had nothing in them about Wizards taking custody of children from Muggles.

Okay, starting book two. Year two, whichever. Things are going to change quickly, I think from the original story from here. Certain details will be unavoidable, as the Defense post has a reputation for being cursed, but others will be quite different. The bit from the last chapter will be dealt with soon enough, it's just that personally, I think an eleven year old would not want to remember seeing an adult bitten in half by a three-headed dog, and would thus do what he could to forget it. Not to mention, there's a possibility that the notion was 'helped' along. The first three chapters are a little short, but from chapter 4 on, (that I have written) the page count hasn't dropped under 10, and I'm nine chappies out. (Wanted to wait, but couldn't take it.. so you guys got the chappies anyway.)

Over the next three days, Harry found it difficult to concentrate on his homework. Not because it was difficult, or even because his relatives were being obnoxious, but because he was hoping that the Malfoy or Weasley families could point him in a specific direction for his research. Said anxiety left him more and more prone to accidentally moving things in his room. Luckily, this was limited to pencils spontaneously rolling off the desktop, and other incidents that even Harry was hard pressed to believe were his doing.

When Hedwig finally returned, she carried only one letter, and Harry thumped himself on the head, wondering why he didn't think to ask both families to send one through her, as that was the simplest way he could think of for the missives to get through his relatives' investigations.

Opening the letter, Harry was impressed by the whole thing. Not just the paper, which was a finer type than he'd ever seen before. Even Grunnings' official paperwork was on more coarse paper than this. The ink was also different, but Harry hadn't a clue how. Most of all, the handwriting was amazing. It somewhat resembled Professor Snape's, except it was even tidier, and less spidery.

The gist of it gave Harry several directions to pursue, and as he reread it, Harry got the feeling that the Senior Malfoy suspected Harry's home life wasn't sunshine and daisies. It still gave no concrete details, citing Harry's own vagueness as reason, but it did point out that many of the larger libraries in Britain would have a hidden section in them, one accessible only to Wizardkind.

Taking notes of what it said, Harry plotted out how to get to a library. His best bet, he figured would be to catch a ride with his uncle, who drove by one every morning as he went to work, and again in the afternoon, when he was returning.

So it was arranged that the next day, when Vernon left for work, Harry would be dropped off in front of the library, and when the man returned, he'd pick his nephew up. The whole family figured that should be enough time to research, or at least to get a good start.

The next morning, the boy woke early, and started on breakfast. He knew that he'd have to cook something special in the next few days to 'thank' them, or they'd start calling him ungrateful again, even if he thanked them verbally. He was mentally planning this out, and dishing up the first helpings as his relatives arrived to their places in the kitchen.

"Good, you've started," Vernon mumbled around a mouthful of bacon, and Harry was reminded of the stories Fred and George told of their younger brother. Trying not to laugh, he turned back to the stove, where there were more bacon strips frying.

"Pet's given me a list of supplies to purchase, so there'll be a side trip to the grocers when I pick you up, boy," Vernon had chased the bacon down with orange juice, and then gulped down some coffee by this time.

"We've got guests coming over tomorrow," Petunia explained.

Figuring now was as good a time as any, Harry tried out a plan he'd been tinkering with for the last few days. "Is there any way that I can get chores to act as trade for things?"

"Explain what you mean by that," Vernon was again talking through food, "and I'll think about it."

"Well, we know my list of chores usually includes cleaning the house on a roughly weekly basis," Harry was carrying the last of Dudley's eggs to the table as he spoke, "What if we said that was payment for me living under the same roof? And cooking was payment for food. Then gardening would be payment for my supplies, and I'd swear to stay quiet and out of sight during guest trips in exchange for being able to walk to the park and let Hedwig out every few days so she can get some exercise."

A moment of silence, and Harry was readying himself for the dash to the smallest bedroom ahead of his uncle and cousin as they yelled and hollered. Setting the dishes used to cook in the sink, Harry braced himself.

"I'll think about it," Vernon, when Harry chanced a glance, was a little on the purple side, but seemed to be calming down. Then a smirk crossed his face, and Harry felt a stab of worry, "You never said anything about clothes, boy, what's your deal for them?"

"Well," Harry hadn't thought about that one, but spoke as he actually did, "My clothes are all things Dudley is either too -tall- to wear or has worn out, so I suppose..."

"You mend them, that makes them yours," Petunia piped up, then added, to it, "If you want anything new, you'll have to do mending for me. Simple enough. As you already do your own laundry, that covers that."

Harry suspected he'd just given his uncle a new weapon, but felt that having to trade for everything was better than simply being told he wasn't worth anything, and that freaks didn't deserve anything either.

"What about washing up dad?" Dudley added his two cents worth, and Harry knew this could only get worse.

"That's for our own sake," Vernon grumbled, "We wouldn't want him stinking up the place, and how clean would it be if he was cleaning out the tub, but hadn't washed in a week?"

A mental sigh of relief nearly knocked Harry to the floor at that, and the boy resolved to find a way to get to his Gringotts' account. He'd have to do something to guarantee he had something to trade for any other quirky details of life.

Finishing the dishes, Harry dashed upstairs to gather his bag of paper and pens, so he could take notes in the library when Vernon dropped him off. He made it back downstairs in time to hear Dudley call out that he'd be at Piers' for the day, and to meet his uncle at the door.

"Get a move on boy, you know your seat," Vernon snapped at him as they walked out the door.

Moving quickly, Harry climbed into the back seat, covered in towels, to 'keep his filth off the nice clean car,' and buckled up. He noticed

one neighbor was mowing his lawn and had a sour expression on his face. At first he was puzzled, then he realized the neighbor was gracing him with that face, and remembered that St. Brutus' was a school for juvenile delinquents. The knowledge that the neighbors wouldn't even give him the benefit of a doubt bothered him, and he made note to add that to his firsthand reports of Muggle behavior for the older Slytherins.

As the car arrived in front of the library, Vernon turned and ground out, "I'll be back a little after four. Be here, or I'll leave you."

"Yes sir," Harry nodded as he climbed out. The car was gone as soon as he closed the door behind him, and Harry clambered up the steps at the front of the library, to read its hours of operation. Groaning aloud at the posted hours, Harry sat down to wait three hours for the place to open.

Thus he was more than a little surprised when an individual in a tartan robe approached him. At first, Harry just thought it was a loopy individual, then he remembered that wizards and witches wore robes, and for some reason, never caught on to denims, trousers, and slacks being the norm in the Muggle's view.

"Lad, you looking for the other side of the library?" The man called out, then waved a hand, "Follow me, I can show you in."

Wondering if this could be considered stupid or not, Harry followed, at a distance, and gaped more than a little when the man tapped a wall, in broad daylight, albeit early in the morning, and muttered a spell out loud. He was getting ready to walk away, pretending he hadn't a clue as to who the man was, when the wall section tapped faded away, and the man gestured towards it with a shallow bow, "Welcome to Surrey's very own Wizard's library. We don't have to worry about Muggles, it's too early even for the librarians."

Hesitantly, Harry walked through the doorway, and listened to the man, wizard, librarian, whichever explain the rules of the establishment. Volume was to be kept down, no running, no eating over books, and as he was a student, no spellcasting. The catalogue was simply a parchment where one wrote the subject of their search,

and a list of books containing that subject would appear on the paper under the heading.

Once a searcher narrowed down their topic, the paper would then provide directions to the desired book or books. Readers could check out a book for two weeks at a time, and would have to tap the spine and say 'renew,' if they wanted to renew them. Unfortunately, as an underage patron, Harry couldn't use magic, which included renewing his books. Thus, he'd have to renew in person should he want to. If he wrote down a mailing address, the library could send an owl every two weeks to pick up old books and drop off new ones if he wanted them. The downside was that he'd have to leave a note each time if he wanted the owl to return in two weeks. He'd also have to return the books in person, if he was going to return them early, as that process also included a spell.

Once the spiel was completed, the librarian simply asked if Harry needed it repeated, and the boy shook his head, thanking the man. He took the paper, and wrote Muggle-Wizard custody, and wasn't surprised when he was asked to widen his parameters. He tried Wizarding custody rules, and got several books.

A few hours passed, and Harry's stomach growled. Deciding he needed to leave the library, he found a different librarian, this time, a witch, to give him directions to the Wizarding exit, so he could get something to eat.

Following her directions, Harry was interested to discover himself in Wizarding London, according to the signs. Though it was in an offside alley, Harry chose to believe them. After all, if there was a Diagon Alley in London, what kept there from being a Season Alley?

As he wandered Season Alley, Harry slowly began recognizing buildings and supposed he was approaching Diagon Alley. His guess was proven right as he passed the Quidditch shop. Without a guide to rush him along, Harry felt free to browse. The store selling brooms was fascinating, and Harry felt like he should like to buy one when he was sure of whether or not he'd be a Quidditch player. He slunk out of there, feeling a sense of loss, but knowing he'd have time to oogle the brooms to his hearts' content at another time.

Though it was a bit fuzzy in his head, Harry thought he knew the path to Gringotts', and was proud of himself, just a bit, when he recognized the pillars in front, complete with warning for thieves. He was amazed when he thought he even recognized the goblin in front. Reading the name quickly, Harry asked, "Ah, Mister Frognoe, do you work in front of the building every day at this time?"

Blinking, the goblin seemed nonplussed to be addressed at all, much less with a measure of respect, "I've been the door guard for the day shift for many years, lad. Why do you ask?"

"I was here last year, well, almost a year ago. And I thought I recognized you from when I was here last." Harry explained.

"You keep that skill, lad," The goblin's face split into a grin, "And the managers of Gringotts' will have a job for you when you graduate Hogwarts. That is, you do go to Hogwarts, right?"

Nodding, the boy took note of the potential job offer, "I'll keep that in mind, Mister Frognoe, thanks."

Puffing up, the goblin seemed quite happy to let the drab-looking human child through the doors of the bank. Not sure how to go about this, Harry hesitated until he saw lines forming. He stood at one that looked like it was for normal bank business, and waited. Luckily, lines didn't move as slowly with goblins heading them as he'd heard the human bank lines did.

When it was his turn, Harry peered up at the goblin at the desk, and was amazed to again recognize a face, or rather, the ears and sharp, pointy teeth. Taking a deep breath, Harry asked, "Is there any way a minor can have possession of their own vault key?"

Blinking, the goblin stamped a piece of paper, "I'm afraid, child, that is not business I deal with. If you turn to your right, and walk in past the passage to the vaults, the third goblin on that new wall of desks is whom you need to speak to. There isn't even a line, so you shouldn't have a wait."

"Thank you, Mister Snagspear," Harry was oblivious to the expression on the goblins' faces and on those of the people in line behind him as he walked over to the new goblin he'd been pointed to. If he'd seen the shocked looks, he might have asked what they were for, and he might have learned that in general, wizards treated goblins as necessary evils, and in return, goblins made the wizards wish the evils weren't necessary.

As he stood in front of the goblin at the third desk of the second wall of desks, Harry peered at the nametag and tried to memorize the features. He began to understand why Mister Frognock had marveled at his recognizing a goblin at all. They all had exceptionally pointy ears and teeth, and very spindly fingers. But Frognock's ears were straight up pointing, and Mister Snagspear's had pointed up and to the back. Not to mention there were a few knobs spread throughout the cartilage leading to the tips. This newest goblin, Mister Swingstaff, had ears that pointed almost straight to the sides.

"I was pointed here by Mister Snagspear, when I asked if there was a way for a minor to have possession of their own vault key," Harry explained at the goblin's curious glance.

"Ah," Swingstaff had the momentary look of surprise on his face at the actual name of a goblin being used, jotted something down, then schooled his face into a blank mask. Momentarily, Harry envied that ability, but listened avidly as the goblin explained the rules of vault keys. "If it is the key to a trust vault in your name, you may carry the key yourself. If it is a vault leading to your family's holdings, you must wait until emancipation or majority, whichever comes first. In the case of emergencies or extenuating circumstances, exceptions can be made, but that requires a rather daunting amount of paperwork on either your or my part, and I'd greatly like to avoid that if I can at all."

Grinning at the goblin's frankness and honesty, Harry spoke, "I think it's a trust vault, but I'm not sure, as I only learned last year my family even had one in the first place."

"Your name?" with a quill poised to jot the name down, the goblin couldn't school his features as quickly this time to recover from the shock at the boy's next words.

"Harry Potter," and the boy was as surprised as the goblin when the sharp teeth clacked together and the beady eyes widened so much Harry wondered if they would fall out.

"You most certainly have a trust vault, and there are family vaults as well," making more notes, the shocked expression on the goblin's face was starting to fade already. Tapping the desk, Swingstaff then spoke to it, unfortunately, it was in a language Harry didn't understand. He thought he understood the word Griphook, but wasn't sure, until the goblin that had led him and Hagrid to his vault and to seven thirteen last year walked up. He really didn't know how he knew it was the same goblin, but the fact remained that he'd known it was Griphook before he saw the name badge.

"Griphook, please take Mister Potter to the Key Draft," Swingstaff apparently surprised Griphook with something, as a quick conference occurred between the two goblins in that language Harry couldn't understand. At the end of the quick conference, Griphook nodded, and gestured for Harry to follow him.

As they plodded along, Harry looked around, and was amazed by the various carvings on the walls. Recognizing a theme, Harry wondered aloud, "Are these depictions of various goblin rebellions?"

Griphook stopped, turned, and peered at the small boy, then grinned, all his sharp teeth showing, "Yes, yes they are, Mister Potter, it's an honor for you to recognize that after only one year of schooling."

"Our History of Magic professor drones on and on about goblin rebellions in class, and most of us fall asleep until we're working through them in the book later." Harry was still looking around, so he didn't see the bristle-relax movement by the goblin in front of him. "I don't know how he does it, but Professor Binns manages to make it impossible to stay awake, though the books are fascinating enough."

"You are a most individual human," a new goblin's voice stunned the boy into utter silence. The ears on this individual were almost evenly dragged to the back and out, but didn't stick straight up. His teeth seemed even sharper than any goblins' he'd seen so far. "I am the

one in charge of drafting keys for vaults." The lack of nametags or a nameplate left Harry at a loss. He had no idea how to address this goblin, so he settled for the fall-back.

"It's nice to meet you sir," Harry nodded, then fidgeted a little, "I just needed to withdraw some money to buy supplies for some research I'm doing."

"Ah," the goblin breathed, "Currently, your key is resting at Hogwarts, at the behest of the Headmaster."

"Why does he have my key?" Harry remembered Hagrid as having it.

"As he is your steward, he can oversee your vaults," the explanation brought about more questions.

"Does that make him my guardian according to the Wizarding world?" Harry asked.

"I don't know the custodial aspects of stewards but," the goblin confessed, "financially, he can deny your purchases, and even, in times of emergency, access your funds, but only in as much as they regard your needs."

"Is there a fund set up for the Dursleys?" Harry asked, wondering at Dumbledore's control of his money.

"At this time, there is not," Griphook interjected.

"Is there a way to set one up?" Harry asked, "In Muggle funds?"

"It will take time, must be approved by your steward, and should be done at a later date," the Key goblin, as Harry had taken to calling him indicated, "First, we should see about making you a copy of your Trust Vault key."

"The headmaster even controls that Vault, right, just so I know?" Harry wanted it made clear.

"As long as the funds are spent on supplies for school, or in regards to your education," the response made Harry relax, "the Headmaster of Hogwarts will not even see the charges for the purchase."

"When would I no longer need a steward?" Hoping it wasn't when he was able to access all his vaults, his hopes were quickly dashed.

"When you reach your majority," the goblin's face stretched in a slight smirk at the boy's expression. "It shouldn't be that bad, child, I doubt the Headmaster will demand an accounting for everything you purchase."

"It's just that I'm still trying to figure out who my guardians actually are," Harry waved his hands around in frustration, "I was to all intents and purposes, dropped on my relatives' door as a baby, and nothing was set up to help them raise me. I was never told of the Wizarding world, and am now learning about it as things slap me in the face. Whenever I try to learn something beforehand, I find blocks, that make it difficult to make any real progress."

"Ah," the two goblins seemed to reach an understanding.

"In that case," the older goblin reached into a drawer in his desk, and pulled a key, "Here is a copy of your Trust Vault key, and I would suggest you keep its existence to yourself. If you stand within your vault, and ask for books to be transferred, the vaults belonging to your family will respond. As nothing will have been withdrawn, the Headmaster does not have to hear of it. Besides, once you leave the Trust Vault, the books will return to their original locations."

"Thank you!" Harry's relief showed on his face, in his voice, and even in his hands, and something about it spoke to the Key goblin.

"When you come of age, return here, either through asking at the desks, or just ask for a guide to me," the goblin nodded, "If you ask for the Key goblin, they'll know who you're asking for, but my name is Steelknife. Either will get you brought here. At that time, we can see to it that yours is the only copy of the key to your vaults, all of them."

"Thank you Mister Steelknife," Harry grinned, then followed Griphook back out of the room. With his back turned, he missed the grin on the goblin's face. If he had seen it, he might have been frightened, or he might have recognized it as the same type of expression that appeared on Professor Snape's face when planning out the tests to give out each year.

Returning to the main part of the bank, Griphook quickly led the boy to the Vaults. One quick, and rather fun ride in the carts later, and Harry stood in front of his Trust Vault. Griphook took the key, and opened the vault. Taking the pouch from last year out of his pocket, Harry opened it and put a few coins inside. At Griphook's direction, he told the walls that it was for research supplies. He then stood up, with the pouch of Sickles in his pocket, and asked for books on Wizarding custody laws.

He was rather surprised to have gotten anything at all, but was not expecting the single sheet of paper that appeared in his hands. Peering at it, he blinked.

"Mister Griphook," Harry turned and showed it to the goblin, "Does Gringotts' have anything to do with wills?"

"More than a little," Griphook smirked, "Most often we are the ones who write them for Wizards, the ones who ensure they're read, and executed, and the ones who carry out the shifts of funds entailed."

"This," Harry stuttered, "I've never seen one before, but this looks like what I always thought a will would."

Peering at it, the goblin nodded, "It's a will. It seems to have not been executed however, or it would be in a lawgoblin's office."

The name at the very bottom made Harry pause, "Why would the Marauders have a will in my family's vault?" Puzzled, the boy then asked if he could take the will with him.

"Try taking it out of the door. If it disappears, then no," the goblin was singularly unhelpful.

Rolling his eyes, Harry was amazed when the paper was still in his hands as he left the vault. Figuring that this was all the help he'd get out of the Potter vaults, he decided to return to Wizarding London to get his lunch, and to get back to the library, to continue his research.

So far he'd only found that a child born in the Wizarding world was supposed to have Wizarding guardians. If said child had a Muggleborn parent, and all Wizarding relatives had expired, any wizards or witches named guardian by the wizard parent had precedent in custody over any Muggle relatives, even if the named guardians weren't related. Harry could only hope that Dumbledore hadn't been named his guardian, as that would add another loop of knots to the problem.

After eating, Harry dashed to the library and searched out a few more books. At three fifty, he closed up the books he had in his hands, having found all he could from them, and checked out the next ones on his list. He wrote his mailing address, and asked for the owls to arrive at night, if possible, as he lived in a Muggle neighborhood. He left before the librarians could make a fuss about having had Harry Potter in their library for most of the day.

Making it across the street, Harry stood and waited for his uncle to drive past. As the car neared, the boy wondered if the man was going to pretend he wasn't there, but the car stopped. Climbing in quickly and buckling up again, Harry was relieved.

"Well," Vernon seemed in a good mood, "What did you find, boy?"

After relaying his findings from the books, he spoke of his trip to the Wizarding bank, "I found out that there isn't a fund set up for you and Aunt Petunia to be taking care of me, but I asked about getting that fixed. Unfortunately, since the Headmaster is the steward, he has final say."

A grunt met his statement, "So if your parents named a - a wizard or witch as your guardian, that person would be in charge of you over us?" Vernon tested a theory out.

"Yeah," Harry nodded, "As far as I can tell. Though I hope they didn't name the Headmaster as my guardian, because that makes things even more complicated. It's bad enough that I'm supposed to have a guardian from their side over you, but if it's him and he dumped me off on you, then never arranged for compensation-

"We should be entitled to restitution," Vernon actually agreed with the boy. Harry would have been amazed, but he figured that was where more than half the trouble he'd had with his relatives had stemmed from. They had no ability to tell Dudley no, and to add another child to raise to that, without so much as a 'thank you,' well, Harry wasn't really surprised to be despised.

"Is there a dictionary at number Four?" Harry asked. The books had had words Harry wasn't familiar with, and Vernon had just used another. He'd never expected that books on legal issues would have their own language.

"Why?"

"Well," Harry started, "for one thing, I read a lot of words in the books that were strange, or seemed to be used oddly. Then you used another one. I've never heard of 'restitution' before."

"It's the same thing as compensation," Vernon smirked.

This led to the car being filled with discussion on the meanings of words in the legal realm. By the time they reached number Four, Privet Drive, Harry felt as though he could better understand what he'd taken down as notes, and might recopy them so he could look at them later and know the meanings of the strange legalese he'd gotten a crash course in.

I'm doing what I can to prevent Harry from being genius, prodigy, or twelve going on fifty. So please forgive my adding Harry needing to learn the words of lawyers as an attempt to counter him getting dangerously close to knowing everything else.

I honestly think the Dursleys weren't getting any help in taking care of Harry. I'm not saying that it's a good reason for them treating him

badly (seeing as there is no good reason for that), but as far as I know, foster parents get money each month for taking on children that aren't theirs, regardless of family income otherwise. Why not have the same be true in this case?

I write to get the plot bunny out of my head. I post to get other's ideas of what is good, and what needs fixing. I'm out to enjoy myself, while I improve my writing, and as long as what you see me doing wrong is something I can fix, I will most certainly try.

The next day, the Dursleys scrambled to clean up an already spotless house. Dudley and Vernon spent much of the day cleaning themselves, while Petunia ensured that every surface in the den, kitchen and hallway was spotless. Harry, meanwhile, was tending the garden, and the outside of the house. He was still more than a little disconcerted by the looks he got from the neighbors, but hoped he wouldn't have to suffer from them for long.

He was hoping that the books he'd borrowed or arranged to borrow from the library would have information that would make it possible for him to find new guardians. He wasn't liking the Muggle world any more than the Wizarding at the moment, but still felt at home in the electricity powered environment.

As soon as the outside of the house was cleaned, Harry peeled off his shoes, leaving himself barefoot, and rinsed them off, then dried them with a ratty old shirt that neither he nor Dudley could wear any more. He wadded it up, and placed it into the bin. Careful not to touch anything but the doorknob, he walked inside. Setting his slightly soggy shoes just in the back entryway, Harry looked at his Aunt.

"Mind if I shower?" Harry was edging away from the freshly disinfected counter tops as he spoke.

"Yes, please do. I don't want you touching anything while you're in that state, and there's still cleaning to do." She waved him up the stairs, yelling as he went, that Vernon and Dudley had better not keep him out of the shower, there was still cleaning needed and the boy needed to be clean to clean properly inside.

Relieved to see that not only was the bathroom empty, it had a relatively clean towel on the rod waiting for him. He snagged fresh clothes, and double-checked the towel.

After cleaning himself up, Harry settled his clothes in the bin for his clothing alone, then trekked back downstairs to rejoin the cleaning effort. He, for one, failed to see the need, the house was already spotless, but maybe the guests were allergic to dust.

By the time the guests were to arrive, the house had been cleaned top to bottom wherever anyone could see, and doors were closed where the cleaning would be impossible. Vernon and Petunia's room, of course, was locked. Dudley's room was to have a closed door, and Harry's would be locked as well. To double check, Vernon ran through a list of what the family would do to ensure the guests felt welcomed, and Harry nodded at the instruction to stay quiet and not be noticed.

What should have been a smooth, quiet night, where Harry worked on homework and the books that he'd borrowed from the library ended up a rather painful memory in Harry's book. Somewhere between eight and nine, after the families sat down in the den to chat, Harry heard a rather distinctive pop. Looking around, Harry was amazed to see a House Elf. It was one he'd never seen before, so he knew it wasn't from Hogwarts. Not to mention, its covering was rather ratty, stained and hole-ridden.

"Hello?" Harry's greeting was met with tears, and a rather giddy jump that had the boy nervous about noise.

"Oooh, Mister Harry Potter is greeting Dobby he is!" the elf gushed.

"I don't mean to be rude," Harry risked a glance at the door, "But do you think you could keep it down? My relatives are entertaining, and they don't like noise."

"Dobby is here to warn Mister Harry Potter not to return to Hogwarts!" the elf lowered its voice a little, but Harry still worried about volume.

"Why do you not want me to return?" Harry was puzzled almost as much as worried.

"Hogwarts is being unsafe for some students, and Mister Harry Potter is being one of them!" the elf yipped, and shortly after, Harry did too, as the elf dashed for the door.

"Wait please!" Harry froze as the elf swung the formerly locked door open, and as it would have met the hand of the creature, Harry's kept

it from making contact, "That would make noise. Why don't you please explain what you can to me, and stay calm?"

"Ooh, Mister Harry Potter is too kind to be worrying for a House Elf. Dobby is just being a bad elf and warning him when his Master is telling him to keep it quiet." The chattering was more of a run-on sentence than anything. It left Harry wondering if the Elf needed air or not. It continued as he thought that, "But Dobby can't be letting the plot be hurting Mister Harry Potter, he is being the hope to us House Elves, and even to the goblins and to the Wizards!"

"What's this plot?" Harry asked, and regretted it as the elf trekked to the closet door this time. He caught the creature in time, rather glad he knew that elves punished themselves when they did wrong, "If you think you have to punish yourself, either wait until you leave here, or settle for twisting your ears or something. I'll get into trouble and might get kicked out of the house if you make a lot of noise."

Freezing, the elf looked at Harry. "Your family is being unkind enough to kick you out for noise?"

"They don't like me," Harry grumbled, "So I don't really have anywhere else to go if they don't keep me. I can't stay here, because I need to learn what I can at Hogwarts. So you see, I have to go."

"You can't!" Somehow the exclamation managed to still be quiet, though painfully squeaky. Harry froze as the conversation downstairs paused. Then the elf started talking again, quieter though, "It is not being safe!"

"It's not exactly safe here either." Harry looked at the door that led out to the main part of the house, "If you could give me any clues as to why it wouldn't be safe, I'd appreciate them, then I could stay away from whatever it is, and maybe we would both be-

"No, Mister Harry Potter is not understanding," the elf yipped again, "just being at Hogwarts is being not safe!"

"Dobby," Harry tried one more time, "I don't have anywhere else. If I stay here, I won't learn magic. If I don't learn magic, I can never get out of here. Do you want me to be here for the rest of my life?"

"If it's safer," Dobby's face set in determination, and Harry genuinely became afraid, not just worried, but nearly terrified, "then Dobby is being sure that Mister Harry Potter is not going to Hogwarts. It is being better all around."

"No, Dobby!" Harry gasped as the popping noise sounded again, and the elf disappeared. Not wanting to see what was about to happen, but knowing he'd be held accountable for it all the same, Harry only went as far as the top of the stairs, but saw the pudding hovering over Mrs. Mason's head in the den, and sagged. He'd read about that charm. He was also aware that the only known source of magic in the area was him, so he'd be held responsible for underage magic. He was only glad he'd told his relatives about the rule, so they wouldn't crow about that. Knocking his head into the railing, Harry fought back the tears, knowing, just knowing that his chances for leaving the Dursleys, ever, had just been sent to a really hot place, in a woven wicker basket.

The pudding fell, and his uncle hollered, "BOY!!"

Wincing, Harry climbed slowly down the stairs. Knowing better than to hope that he'd be able to talk his way out of it, he kept silent, fetched the materials to clean with, and began cleaning. A sudden thought occurred to him, and he whispered to his aunt that an owl was probably on its way for him. This spurred the woman into motion and she, in all politeness and saccharine sweet falsity, suggested that Mrs. Mason might like to use their bathroom to clean the worst of the mess off herself, and that Mr. Mason was welcome to join her.

As the couple vanished up the stairs, and into the bathroom, as guided by Dudley, Vernon wheeled around to face Harry. "Thought that would be funny, did you, boy?"

"No sir," Harry quickly tried to concoct something that would make it clear to be an accident, "I was reading a text book, and accidentally

cast the spell out loud enough for it to work. I didn't know it would go through a wall, the floor, and a few other walls, sir."

"You'd better hope this didn't ruin the deal," Vernon hissed as an owl flew through and dropped off a letter. It luckily, flew right back out before the Masons trekked back downstairs.

As the distressed couple was returning to the living room, Harry kept his gaze to the floor, finishing cleaning. When they made rather clear noises about leaving, Harry stood up, and slowly approached them. He apologized for the mess with the pudding. He, with help from Vernon, related that he'd been working on a project that would lift things into the air, and had forgotten about it being downstairs when he'd been sent upstairs.

Vernon made it clear that Harry was more than a little unstable, and that that had been the reason Harry was kept upstairs. After expressing his apologies again, Harry returned upstairs to read the letter stamped with the Ministry's seal. He hoped that the Masons weren't too offended by pudding-fall, but at least they hadn't seen the owl.

He'd just finished reading the note when his uncle stormed up. "Well, boy?"

"It's what I thought it was," Harry sighed, "I swear I didn't mean to cast the charm, it just happened. I suppose accidentally doesn't do much for keeping me out of trouble, does it?"

"No, it doesn't," the large man smirked, and Harry found himself rather frightened again that night, "and since you didn't stay out of the way of our guests as the deal states, we don't need to let you out of your room. I don't think you'll be going back to that school, boy, as just one year led to this mess. Another six, and who knows what havoc you'll wreak?"

"Are you going to leave Hedwig outside?" Harry took a chance and brought the owl into the conversation.

A funny look crossed the man's face, and he stomped out the door. Oddly, it was left open, and just as Harry was going to investigate, he brought up Harry's trunk, while Petunia carried a cage, with a rather fussy looking Hedwig inside. Setting the trunk on the floor, and the owl on the desk, Vernon and Petunia turned to leave. "You'll be getting food three times a day, just so we don't have to deal with a corpse, and we'll let you out to clean yourself. But it'll be a long while before you're let out again for anything else."

Resigned, Harry waited until he heard the clicking of the locks. Then he rushed to Hedwig's cage and apologized to her for her getting locked up with him. "Hope you enjoyed being outside, girl, it looks like that was the last either of us will see of the wild for a while."

I write to get the plot bunny out of my head. I post to get other's ideas of what is good, and what needs fixing. I'm out to enjoy myself, while I improve my writing, and as long as what you see me doing wrong is something I can fix, I will most certainly try.

When I first wrote this, I thought it was a cake, so please catch any cake-slips on my part, please! I had one reader who seemed to feel I was pardoning the Dursleys' actions, so I'll clear this up now. I do not in any way agree with what they have done to either of the boys in their care, and Harry certainly doesn't deserve to have to bargain for what are normally things taken for granted, but that's how this story is working out. I'm trying to write everyone in this story as being human, and three-dimensional, capable of learning from their mistakes. I'm hoping that something will wake the Dursleys, but I won't promise anything (Pardon my optimistic streak, it doesn't surface often). There's just as much possibility that Harry will turn in the treatment details to magical authorities and find himself placed with another family entirely. We'll see.

Oh, and I wanted to test the waters as to how naive I'm allowed to write Harry as being... I have a rather interesting joke written in so far, but I'm not sure if anyone else would believe he wouldn't have caught on to the meaning behind the joke. It's still a couple chapters away, so feel free to argue in either direction. I'll take note, and adjust accordingly. Or I'll at least try.

A few weeks passed with Harry scribbling out as many assignments as possible, and somehow managing to still get books from the library, through the bars Vernon had installed on the window. He took notes from the books and learned a rather alarming amount of information concerning custody rules in the Wizarding world.

Enough so that when he finished Hogwarts, Harry almost felt confident that he could take that as a job option as well as the goblins' offer. Of course, that all hinged on getting back into the Wizarding world at all. As the summer drew closer to its end, Harry wondered if the Dursleys intended to simply keep him in the house year round, or if they were going to send him to Stonewall, or even that St. Brutus' that they spoke of.

One night, Harry dreamt of walking the passages of Gringotts' where the goblins stood in lines waiting for him to tell what their differences were, tiny as they may be, and then each identified goblin would ask him about a facet of custodial battles in the Wizarding world. Just as he ran out of goblins and facts, it felt like someone was tickling his nose. Swatting at the fly in front of his dream face, Harry told it to leave him alone. It kept flying in front of his face, and suddenly Hedwig appeared in his dream, larger than life and hooting happily. Not used to such noise in his dream, the boy snapped awake.

He was amazed to see that there was in fact, something in front of his nose, Harry quickly put on his glasses and peered at the string attached to the object. Then to the hand attached to the string and the person attached to the hand. Fred was at his window. Blinking, he blearily asked, "What's going on?"

"Jail break Potter," Ron poked his head around Fred's to peer in through the window.

"Get Hedwig near enough, and we'll get these bars pulled off," George spoke from the other side of Fred. After a quick glance, all the sleepiness left Harry.

"You three are in a flying car?" Harry yipped.

"That we are," Fred grinned, "Our dad tinkered with it. Currently we've got it set to be visible to Muggles, so you can see us, but when we get you out of there, we'll all be invisible again. Just a push of the button!"

Rolling his eyes, Harry pulled his trunk from its spot on the floor to rest on his bed, then gently lifted Hedwig's cage to place her there as well. "Okay."

Looping something around the bars, Fred laughed at Harry's expression, "Wake up, Harry, we'll have you out of there in no time!"

Harry mumbled to himself about 'you be cheerful when woken in the middle of the night after a rather twisted dream.' He was then rather unsettled when the wall around his window, with a creak, a groan, and more than a little noise, pulled away from its mooring, and there was suddenly a rather large hole in his room. Fred quickly leaned into the room through the hole, and coached Harry to pass the owl over. As he handed the owl to Ron, Fred jumped through, and both boys lifted the trunk and hoisted it into the car. Just as both of them finished clambering into the vehicle, Vernon thundered through the door and started yelling about how Harry had better not come back if he knew what was good for him.

With a deep sigh of relief, Harry opened the cage holding Hedwig, and rolled down a window, "There you go, Hedwig, feel free to fly on your own and beat us there."

A hoot and a hop later, and Hedwig was winging her way to the Weasley's home ahead of the four boys. Luckily, George and Fred had re-engaged the invisibility on the car, and no one thought much about an owl flying through the sky. If they noticed she appeared from nowhere, they would just assume she'd been flying and they had only just noticed her.

"You do realize, Mum's going to kill us," Ron was a few shades paler than normal, "If she doesn't string us up by our toenails. Or something."

"So why didn't you guys ever answer about the Wizarding custody questions?" Harry changed the subject quickly.

"We did," Fred looked back, "It's you who never answered our letters."

"I never got any letters from anyone other than the Malfoys, who used Hedwig." Harry shook his head, "Dig through my trunk if you want proof."

"We'll believe you," George never stopped watching the sky as he drove, "But that just means someone was keeping your mail from you."

With a groan, Harry realized who it probably was, "I think I know who did it. A house elf, named Dobby."

"Why would a house elf keep your mail?" Ron was puzzled.

"It kept saying something about Hogwarts not being safe, and that I was supposed to stay away." Harry shrugged, then continued. "Then it promptly walked downstairs, Hover Charmed a cake to fall on Dursley guests' heads, and left me to get the letter from the Misuse of Magic department in the Ministry."

"I don't think there's anything that can be done in regards to that," Fred remarked, "But at least we got you out of there."

Shortly, the boys found themselves nearing familiar grounds to the three brothers, and Harry was rather excited to have the opportunity to see the Weasley home. Knowing that the family didn't have a lot of money, Harry expected a smallish house, but as they walked in, he was utterly amazed by the packed space. It was a lot larger on the inside than the outside indicated.

"Enlargement Charms?" Harry breathed, "Wow, I knew they had uses, but for a house? I suppose it would be like what they do for trunks and stuff."

"I really believe the twins now when they say you're a bookworm," Ron snorted, "You're almost as bad as Granger. At least you're not trying to tell me I'm doing everything wrong, and that it's 'Levioosa,' not 'Leviosaa.' Gah, if she does that one more time, I'll--"

"Can you at least cast the Levitation Charm then?" Harry interrupted.

"Well, yeah," Ron nodded, "But--"

"Then hush about it," Harry rolled his eyes, "If you don't like her teaching or coaching methods, say something about it to her, explain that she comes off badly. Instead of whinging to everyone else around you about it. She'll never know it needs fixing if you say nothing."

"Oh," Ron blinked, "I get it. I think."

The rest of the conversation was put on hold, as a bustling, matronly woman stepped out of the kitchen, and immediately set about putting the boys in their places. Lovingly, yet sternly, she chewed Fred up one side, George down the other, and Ron still somehow got chewed out too. Amazed at the display, Harry tried to apologize for the trouble, but she waved it off with a, "Hello dear, it's good to see you again. I do hope the Muggles didn't starve you. You look as though you could use a little food. Are you hungry?"

Flummoxed, Harry just nodded as she shuffled the four boys to the table and placed food in front of them. Waiting his turn to gather a little food, Harry was rather amazed at the amount on his plate when he looked down, and wondered how it got there. As he watched a little more appeared, and the snickering from his left told him that the twins, seated on either side, were filling his plate for him.

"Hope you like being full, Potter," Ron grumbled, "'cause they're gonna keep filling your plate 'til you tell them to stop."

Eyes wide, Harry yipped, "Stop! If I have room for more after this, I'll ask for it, please, no more!"

A slightly lower chuckle alerted the four to a new arrival. Sleepy as he was, Percy seemed to enjoy the twins teaming up on someone other than him. "Good morning, Fred, George, Ronald, Harry, Mum."

"Good morning, dear," Mrs. Weasley bustled about, and about the time she had settled down from her lecture of the twins and Ron, another voice sounded, and she burst out again.

"Do you know what three of your sons got up to this morning?" She raised an eyebrow at the man who came through the door.

"Urh," hesitantly, the man looked at the boys in question, "No? Oh, good morning Harry. Wait, oh dear." Rubbing his face with a hand, he sighed.

"They used that charmed car of yours that I'm sure you thought I didn't know about to go fetch Harry from his relatives at an ungodly hour of the morning!" She was just on the safe side of shrill, and Harry wondered at the trouble the boys were in, except, the four Weasley boys at the table were all focused on eating, rather than the argument their mother was trying to have with her husband.

"Keep eating Harry," Percy shook his head, "They do this all the time. She'll harangue him, then return to lecturing the twins, give Ron a little bit of an earful, and she might cycle like that for most of the day. It's when she's particularly quiet that we need to worry."

"Oh," Harry blinked a little more, then returned to eating. It seemed Percy was right, as Mister Weasley was settling in to eat breakfast, even though his wife was still grumbling at him. Right about the time that everyone settled in again, a smallish girl in a nightgown stumbled in to the room, blearily sat down, and started eating her breakfast.

The oldest three boys, Mister Weasley and Harry had all finished eating by the time the girl woke up enough to look around. She was more than half done eating in her own right, and that left the bottomless pit otherwise known as Ron to be still eating. His mother was still cooking, and Harry wondered why she cooked so much, not even Ron could eat all that, could he?

A squeaky squawk made the brunet peer at the girl in surprise. His gaze was met by a shocked pair of brown eyes before the girl flew out of the room and up the stairs in a flash.

Looking around, Harry saw that the twins were laughing themselves silly, Ron was snickering, and even Percy seemed to be restraining himself.

Between chuckles, Ron gasped out, "She's got a crush on you, been talking about you all summer. Probably will ask for an autograph first thing when she gets done hiding from you."

"Oh," Harry blinked some more.

"Now," Mrs. Weasley, finally done raking her husband over the coals, though neither of them would know the phrase if Harry told it to them, pointed at the three brothers in trouble, and told them to de-gnome the garden. She pulled out a book with a picture on the cover and started to consult it.

As he turned his head sideways to get a better look, Harry was surprised to see that the picture on the cover was simply that of a wizard with longish blonde, wavy hair and bright blue eyes. He supposed that the wizard must be popular, with the way Mrs. Weasley fawned over the book. Or maybe he really knew his stuff. As she read from the book on how to de-gnome one's garden, the snorts issued by the twins and Ron warned Harry that this might not be the case. On a whim, he volunteered to help.

After being shown how the boys actually went about ridding their yard of gnomes, Harry settled in to finishing his homework in the room that he was to share with Ron. He felt more than a little warmed by the news Mrs. Weasley had parted with in her rants to her sons and husband. They'd worried about him. It was nice to actually have friends. He supposed that they were the first he'd ever had, as Dudley had done a rather good job ensuring no one dared during primary school.

The next day, the school lists came by owl, and after reading his list, Harry had to wonder why there were so many texts for Defense that

year. He overheard Mrs. Weasley mumble about how she'd have to buy all new books for her brood, and that the Lockhart books were quite expensive, popular as the wizard was.

A day or so after that, Mrs. Weasley was bustling all her children, including Harry, to get ready early and quickly. She fed them, and Harry felt like bursting afterwards, she fed him so much, and then pointed them at the fireplace. It had a fire, even though it was summer, and at first Harry was puzzled. When Percy pulled a pinch of powder from the mantle above and called out 'Diagon Alley,' Harry blinked as the boy disappeared.

He was still collecting his thoughts as Mrs. Weasley indicated it was his turn. "Take just a pinch, dear, and cast it into the fire. Speak clearly the name of your destination, in this case, 'Diagon Alley,' and step in after it turns green. It won't burn you. Keep your arms close, and watch the grates as you go. When you see the twins, Ron, and Percy, step out quickly or you'll over shoot. Got that?"

Nodding hesitantly, Harry grabbed a pinch from the pot, but apparently stirred up a little too much. He sneezed as he said 'Diagon Alley', and stepped through as it turned green. Keeping his arms close, he watched for four redheads, but never saw them. He was rather amazed though, when he was pushed out into a rather dark and dusty room. He'd thought he had to step out to leave the Floo Network, as Mrs. Weasley had called it.

He overheard a low, cultured voice bargaining with a salesman. Details like, 'wouldn't want the ministry to find it,' made Harry wonder. Then a voice he recognized simpered, 'can I have it father?' only to be told no, maybe when he was older, or managed to beat 'the Mudblood's' grades.

Peering cautiously out, Harry recognized Malfoy, and who apparently must be the boy's father.

Slinking out after them, Harry tried to edge from this more than a little scary alley to Diagon. He was about to chance asking directions when Hagrid spotted him. "'Arry, what are you doing in Knockturn Alley?'"

"Oh," Harry stuttered a bit, "I was walking around and got lost, I think I made a wrong turn somewhere, and wound up here. I was just about to ask for directions back to Diagon Alley when you spotted me."

"Don't spend much time here, 'arry," Hagrid cautioned, pulling the boy into Diagon proper, "it's dangerous. The wizards in Knockturn are Dark, and not very nice."

"Oh," Harry spotted the redheads of the Weasleys and pointed them out to Hagrid, "There's my guides this time!"

He dashed off to meet them, and was scolded for getting separated. After a bit of discussion, the Weasley parents decided that they would lead Ginny around Diagon Alley. Telling the boys to meet before lunch at Flourish and Blott's, they left Percy to navigate on his own, and the twins were set in charge of Ron and Harry, ironically. The twins quickly decided that of the two younger boys, Ron was the more likely to get into trouble, so they stuck with him, for entertainment.

Left to his own devices, Harry wandered aimlessly, and found himself in the same area as he'd entered Diagon Alley from during his first year. Just outside the tavern Hagrid had led him through the year before, he was made privy to an intriguing conversation.

"I heard Hogwarts had to hire another Defense teacher," he overheard from a group of witches at the table nearest the door.

"They've had to find a new one every year for almost fifty years," another witch grumbled.

"I heard this latest one had to do with that Potter boy," the three women cackled to one another and leaned in closer, and Harry lost the thread of their conversation to the ruckus that was kicked up near the bookstore.

"Did you know that You-Know-Who is at Flourish and Blotts'?" a youngish looking witch giggled to another witch her age, and Harry

was completely floored. He'd thought that 'You-Know-Who' meant Voldemort, and he didn't think anyone would be happy to have him at a bookstore.

"You twit!" the giggling witch was thwacked over the head by the woman standing next to her, Harry supposed it was her mother, "It's not 'You-Know-Who,' that is at the bookstore, it's Gilderoy Lockhart! He's doing his book signing! You'll start a riot if you say fool things like that!"

"Well, I wouldn't want everyone to know," the girl simpered, rubbing her head, "He's only signing the first three hundred books, and as many autographs as he has photographs!"

"Well, if you're so worried about getting an autograph, why'd you bring it up in front of the Leaky Cauldron!" her mother snapped again, "Now every witch and her sister will know in ten minutes!"

Remembering that he was low on some of his Potions' supplies, Harry put on his best mask, and looked up into the gaze of an adult. He was hoping his hair stayed put long enough to hide the scar, and he asked, "Would you happen to know how I would find the Apothecary? I'm a second year, and the person who was with me last time went there without me, so I never learned where it was."

Nodding, the adult pointed out the building in question. Thanking the man, Harry wandered in that direction, hoping not to get lost along the way. If anyone had asked, the boy would deny trying to avoid the crush caused by a book signing, but to himself, he felt quite relieved that he was going to miss Mister Lockhart's event. What he'd seen of the book that Mrs. Weasley had quoted for de-gnoming the garden wasn't impressive, to his eyes anyway.

In the Apothecary, Harry pulled out the list he'd made himself to keep supplies straight. Reading from it, he slowly made his way around the store, and realized that he'd forgotten to go to Gringotts to replenish his funds. Doing some quick maths, he figured he had just enough to pay for his Potions supplies with what was left in the pouch. Moving to the till, Harry asked if it would be possible to hear the total first, to be sure he had enough. The wizard behind the counter smiled gently

and nodded. Adding up the numbers, he read off the amount it would cost, and the boy sighed in relief, as he had enough, like he'd thought.

After paying for his supplies, Harry left the Apothecary, stowing the shrunken bag into his robes to give to Mrs. Weasley later. Then he figured he might as well seek out the matriarch outright, as he'd have to make sure she knew he was going to Gringotts' as a side trip anyway.

He met up with her outside of a store whose sign was faded and worn, and noticed that she carried a handful of worn out bags in her hands. She was muttering about how her boys should stop outgrowing their older brothers because that defeated the entire purpose of hand-me-downs as she looked up and noticed the dark-haired boy in front of her.

"Oh, Harry, did you need something?" she turned to look at her daughter, who was as usual, hiding behind her, as her husband blithely passed on by, focused on the store across the way, which advertised 'genuine Muggle tools.'

"I realized I needed to go to Gringotts' to be able to pick up any more of my supplies." Harry held out the bag with his Potions' ingredients. "I had enough left over from last year to pick up this, but I still need to buy things for Hedwig, and to replenish my ink, and... well, yeah."

"Oh," Mrs. Weasley focused sadly on the bag from the Apothecary, then pointed at her husband, "While we were searching for you earlier, Harry, Arthur made a trip to Gringotts' and we purchased most of your supplies. That was why we felt it safe to send you with the twins and Ron, rather than trying to go with you. The only supplies left for you to get are your books and your robes, and you might not need new robes. It doesn't look like you grew too much over the summer. You might be okay with just letting down your hems."

Blinking, Harry wondered how the Weasleys could get into his vault. After a bit of thought, he asked out loud, "How did you get the goblins to give you the money to pick up my things?"

"The Headmaster gave us your Gringotts' key." blithely, the matron waved the boy to start walking, as her daughter skittered to hide behind her father instead. "He told us that we only needed to return it after our excursion."

"So the Headmaster has my key normally?" Harry wanted this made clear.

"Why yes, dear." Mrs. Weasley paused, "Why?"

"Unless he's my guardian in the magical world, he hasn't any right to it," Harry tried not to grumble to obviously, "nor does he have any right to give it away to anyone. I looked it up during the time I could this summer."

Shocked, and maybe Harry was imagining things, more than a little pale, Mrs. Weasley asked, "Why would you look into that?"

"I want to live somewhere else next summer," Harry met her eyes, just a few shades different from her daughter's, then continued, "I don't see living with the Dursleys as doing me any good education-wise."

"I'm sure the Headmaster looked into every possible direction to place you before putting you with them," she muttered. "though, goodness knows, Arthur and I petitioned to be able to take custody of you when You-Know-Who was defeated. We asked again at the end of this last year, after learning from the twins that you weren't looking forward to returning."

"Why is everyone following his judgement on the matter?" Harry asked.

Blinking rapidly, Mrs. Weasley stuttered a bit.

"Professor Dumbledore has your best interests at heart, Harry." Mr. Weasley came to his wife's rescue, "We're sure of that."

With that, Harry realized he'd get no better answers from the redheaded clan leaders, and shrugged. He'd ask more questions of someone else later. "I don't suppose I could have my key, could I?"

"Oh, Harry," Mrs. Weasley shook her head, "it's too much responsibility for a child to hold the key to their own vault. It could pop into their head at anytime that they just need to pull a little from it, and then a little more, and a little more, until... Suddenly, there's nothing left in the vault at all."

"Hm," Harry made sure not to meet the woman's eyes as he rolled his. Deciding to write this day's events down, to record them for future references, Harry focused on the direction the Weasleys were headed. Vaguely, he noticed that Percy had made it to the bookstore already, and was chatting with a burly boy Harry thought was the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain, and a Ravenclaw girl while waiting in line.

"Oh, Percy, good!" Mrs. Weasley called out, to the embarrassment of the teen in question, "You're already here. Now, if Ron, Fred, and George would just show up, we could get in line and wait for the Defense books, while Arthur trudges through the rest of the store to get the others."

The Prefect managed to simultaneously pale and blush while standing with his friends and Harry sympathized. Peering around quietly, Harry managed to sneak up to the point in the line where Percy and the other older students stood.

Before they noticed his presence, Harry overheard a rather interesting conversation he'd heard parts of for the short time he'd been at the Weasley house. Last year, Percy had been an OWL-level student, and shortly before Harry's arrival at the Burrow, the results of said testing had been brought in by an owl. Thus, when she wasn't scolding Ron, the twins or her husband, Mrs. Weasley was praising her eldest- in the house- son on his scores.

Apparently, the Ravenclaw girl was no slouch in her studies either. And even if he was rather obsessed, as the twins told it, with winning the Quidditch cup, the Quidditch captain had a good head on his

shoulders as well. He'd just heard what sounded like a friendly rivalry between the three for grades when they spotted him listening unabashedly, and all three grinned.

"Had to get away from the grownups, eh, Potter?" the lilt in the Quidditch captain's voice made Harry wonder if the boy practiced it or if it came naturally.

Harry grumbled, "D'you know anything about Vault keys?"

"What do you want to know?" Percy had a perplexed look on his face.

"What's the youngest a person can be to have their own vault key?" Harry peered up at them, hoping this wouldn't get back to the matriarch he'd just escaped.

"Well," Percy pondered a minute.

"My parents gave me a copy of mine when I started at Hogwarts," the other boy rolled a shoulder, "So I don't know if there's a limit."

"If a parent is worried about their children overspending," the girl added, "they can put a cap on the vault, or set it to have a certain amount, to be refilled or not, at their own decree."

"What if said child is an orphan?" Harry asked.

"Such things would have been provided for in your parents' will, Harry," Percy had a look on his face that told the younger boy to stop asking questions.

"Percy, didn't your family get a copy of his Trust Vault key from Professor Dumbledore?" the Ravenclaw asked.

"Yes, Penelope, I do believe he gave it to my mother." Percy tapped his nose for a second, "Did you ask my mother for it and she fed you a line about not knowing your limits on spending?"

Nodding, Harry waited for the older boy to tell him off.

"Ah," Percy shrugged, "Mum's like that. She doesn't think any of us are grown up enough to make our own decisions. She even tries to make up Bill and Charlie's minds for them, and they've both been out of Hogwarts for a while."

"Oliver, do you think there's a way to get Harry's key remanded to him?" Penelope directed her question to the other boy, and Harry finally remembered his name. A bad joke he'd heard from the Slytherin Quidditch Captain made the small boy snerk and try to hold the laughter in.

"What are you laughing about?" Percy looked worried for the small boy holding his hands over his face, "Or are you about to sick up?"

"No no," snickering some more, Harry tried to pull himself together.

"Potter, if you don't stop laughing, you'll hurt yourself." Wood raised an eyebrow.

Finally catching his breath, Harry tried not to break down laughing again as he prepared to tell the joke. "It's a bad joke I heard from Flint."

"Oh dear," Penelope sighed, "Is it at least clean?"

"I suppose so," Harry was puzzled at that question, "I mean, he told it to us first years without any trouble."

"That doesn't mean a thing," Percy snorted, "Flint may come from an old family, but he'll tell some of the rankest jokes."

"Oh, this one's a rotten one all right, but I don't think it's too gross." Blinking, the second year-in-waiting paused. "But I would guess you three would be better judges. It goes like this, and I'm probably going to mess up the timing. He piped up during a Gryffindor and Ravenclaw match about how ironic it was to have 'Wood on a broom.'"

Deep breaths from all three older students made the shorter student worry.

"I knew he was only getting worse as he got older," Penelope whimpered.

"At least it isn't you he's picking on," Oliver was rubbing his nose.

"I think it's safe to ask you not to tell that one to anyone else," Percy seemed to be blinking about three times as fast as normal.

"Okay," Harry wanted to ask why they reacted the way they did, but wasn't going to bother them any more than he had. Well, except on the key issue.

"Back to the matter at hand." Penelope tried to change the subject.

"If his Magical Guardian feels it's unsafe for him to have his vault key," Wood responded after a bit of thought, "there's nothing that can be done."

"Does he even have a Magical Guardian?" the Ravenclaw asked.

"I'm not sure. Everyone assumes it's the Headmaster," Percy looked at the doorway they had just reached. The line, slow as it was, had moved forward enough that the 'wizard of the hour' was finally visible. Peering through the doorway, Harry noticed that only the witches were fawning over Mr. Lockhart, and any wizards around were looking extremely bored with the whole thing. The students he stood with were no exception to this rule, and Harry boggled at how a sensible girl like Penelope could get so vapid at the sight of the man.

By chance, he, with his incredulous expression, met the gaze of the older boys, and both chuckled. "It's a mystery to us too, Potter," Oliver sighed.

"Is there such a thing as Veela for females?" Harry remembered sneaking a peak at a fifth year's Defense book last year, and it had mentioned Veelas as having allure that, to males was nearly irresistible.

The two older boys smirked, and tried valiantly not to laugh out loud.

By this point, the girl was close enough in line to select her books for classes, and stand giddily waiting for the possibility of having her copies signed. Wondering if he should move back to join the rest of the Weasleys, Harry stood out to the side of the line a bit. Just as the two older boys reached to pull him back in, a voice sounded over his shoulder.

"Ah! Mister Potter!" at the sound of a voice full of laughter and more than a little smarm, Harry whirled.

Blinking, he realized that he was being hailed by the man behind the table covered in photographs and books. Said adult was winding his way around the line, and approaching the dark-haired boy.

"I am honored to finally meet you, Harry, it is okay if I call you Harry, isn't it Harry?" the man was shaking the child's hand and chattering a mile a minute, and blinking, the boy realized he'd blindly nodded in response.

Shaking himself out of it, he noticed that there was a person carrying a camera around. Wondering how in the world the individual could fit the paraphernalia in an enclosed space such as this, the boy almost didn't catch on in time to Lockhart's intentions.

Dragging the boy towards the laden table, the blonde man was still chattering, "I knew it was just a matter of time before you arrived, after all, who wouldn't want to meet the five time winner of Witch Weekly's Best Smile award? And really, I'm not surprised you waited until now, as you certainly had to get the measure of someone who might just be able to commiserate with you on your savior status, didn't you, Harry? I mean, what with all the creatures I've dealt with, I'm getting quite close to your level, or I daresay perhaps even surpassing you? Even as the 'Boy-Who-Lived'?"

Still a little unsettled at the chatter and being pulled around, Harry caught on to the man's intentions to have a photo taken and raised an arm to cover his face, "No, I was just here to pick up texts for classes, Mister Lockhart. If you'll let me go, I'll just go back to my place in line to gather my books."

"Oh," pausing for just a second, the man launched into another monologue, "I am so heartened to see a studious student, such a blessing it is for children these days to actually be willing to learn. There's so much you could learn from me, Harry, so I'll start by doing you a favor and letting you take a picture with me. Might do your popularity a boost to catch up with mine, eh?"

"No," Harry shook his head and extended his arm again, "I don't want my photograph taken. I read over the summer that to publish a picture of a minor, a photographer has to have permission from said minor's guardian, and I don't think you want to talk to mine, much less write to them, so please, don't bother."

"Oh," Nonplussed, the wizard froze and released the boy unconsciously. As soon as the grip loosened, Harry was pulling away and sidling to the Weasleys in line.

When he came level with the three sixth years, Penelope grabbed onto him like a lifeline and dragged him to stand next to her. More than a little worried, Harry peeked at the other two boys, who were again, trying not to laugh. He thought he heard one of them mutter something about her hoping the 'Lockhart glitter would rub off on her,' but didn't want to think too hard about it.

Finally, they made it to the front of the line in a more normal fashion, and Lockhart decided that the three teens standing with him must be his friends, or at least his bodyguards, and took pity on them.

"Oh," he dramatically paused, "I do believe I shall do you a favor anyway, Harry, since you were so noble as to save my photographer the hassle of contacting your guardian. I shall give you and your three guards here free copies of my books, and I shall sign your copies for you, Harry."

Wishing desperately for the man to just stop talking, Harry knew his face was red enough to put Percy's hair to shame. About to refuse, he caught a glimpse of the sheer joy on the Ravenclaw girl's face, and the relief on Percy's. Biting his lip, he merely nodded, and thanked the glory-hound for his generosity.

Upon reaching the fresh air outside, Wood shrugged, and passed his copies of the books to Percy, saying loudly, "I picked up my copies the other day, and was just going with you guys because Penny was worried about whether or not she'd get here on time. Make sure your parents don't pick up the extra copies, Perce." And with that, he walked off quickly, before his fellow sixth year could speak a word.

With a sad smile, Percy shook his head, and stowed the second set of books in a bag, muttering. He approached his parents, who, with Ginny, were just barely reaching the doors to the bookstore, to inform them they had one less set of books to buy, as Oliver had accidentally gotten a second set.

Figuring that the older boy had been feeding his friend a line to get the books accepted, Harry mentally shrugged. He decided that was one Gryffidor who didn't need his eyes opened to shades of gray. He'd ignored the little Slytherin talking to him and focused on the friend of a brother of a friend instead.

Catching sight of the twins and Ron, Harry related the events in Flourish and Blotts', and noticed the sour look on Ron's face at the mention of the photographer incident.

"Bet you couldn't wait to get your picture taken with him, eh, Potter?" Ron grumbled.

"Actually," Harry glared back, "I told him he couldn't take my picture without my guardians' approval."

"Exactly," the drawled word came from behind the small Slytherin and Harry jumped, whirling to meet the laughing gaze of his housemate.

"Potter, meet my father. Father, this is Harry Potter, as if you didn't already know just by looking." The blonde smirked at the redheads that now stood behind Harry.

"Hm," though taller, and with longer hair, the elder Malfoy could almost pass as a twin to his son, and Harry was more than a little disconcerted by this.

"Okay boys," Mr. Weasley hustled through, carrying three more sets of books by Lockhart alone, as well as the texts needed for the other classes his sons and daughter needed. He stopped suddenly, noticing the Malfoys, and both men glowered.

"Are you sure you have enough money to buy your brood's books, Weasley?" the elder blonde's words had Harry's eyes widening, "Or have you finally realized that with a litter of that size, the only way you'll survive is on charity?"

"I hope that someday, Malfoy, you realize that money isn't the only thing one needs in this world," Mr. Weasley returned, obviously holding onto his temper by a thread.

"Ah yes," casually, the man responded, "Fame and glory are good things to have before death as well, but I don't see a single member of your... children, accomplishing either of those."

"Do be careful to spit the hems out, Malfoy," Weasley hissed, "and to wipe the dust off your knees. Wouldn't want to give ourselves away, now would we?"

"At least my family can wipe the dust off," this was the last straw, and both men suddenly lashed out at one another.

Knowing there were undertones to the undertones of the insults just delivered, Harry tried with all he had to fathom what was being said under the words expressed. All he could get out of it was that Mr. Malfoy was calling the Weasleys animals, and Mr. Weasley was commenting on groveling to someone.

Mrs. Weasley waded into the fight, yelling at both men to act their age and set good examples for their children, and for Harry as well. Faking ashamed glances, both men refused to meet her eyes. Stepping back, the elder Malfoy stumbled into Ginny, and an entire pile of books went cascading to the ground. Sneering as the girl scrambled to pick up her books, he turned to his son and raised an eyebrow. As the younger blonde rushed to stand by his father, he

looked Harry in the eye and nodded, "Mister Potter, I do hope your summer ends better than it began."

The rest of him froze as Harry nodded in response to the well wishing. Wondering how the man could be so civil in one breath and yet so caustic for the five minutes preceding, the boy asked himself if there was a possibility of a feud between the two families.

The Weasleys gathered together, and came to the realization that they had all the supplies needed for the next school year. With that, they headed to the nearest public Floo, and trudged back to the Burrow. Discomfited as he was by the Floo system, Harry was still distracted by planning how to answer the questions he was sure the younger Malfoy would have for him upon reaching the Slytherin dorms.

Firstly, the joke Harry quotes Flint for, I know it's horrible, and I know it's probably pushing buttons, but I had the random thought pop into my head, word for word, 'ironic for Wood to be on a broom,' and sputtered laughing to myself. I figured out how to phrase it better, and there you go. I don't know if Harry's response is too naïve or not, but I've been known to make wisecracks like that at the drop of a hat. At the same time, I've been known to listen to the same type of remarks, and only catch on to what was actually being said about fifteen minutes later.

As far as I can tell, in the original series, Harry never actually tells anyone what goes on at the Dursleys. He just makes it clear he hates it there. The closest anyone gets to knowing is Ron and the twins breaking him out second year, and Snape's Occlumency discoveries. I think that may be part of why he is stuck with the Dursleys unguarded for so long. I have no idea what kind of alternative will show up, at this point, but Harry is going to either be forced to speak out, or will come to terms with having to stay with the Dursleys if he doesn't want to tell the whole Wizarding world that his relatives wish he'd never been born, and seemed quite happy to see to it that he knew it.

Someone remind me to add in Harry asking why the twins decided to fetch Harry, please? I am sure I had plans for that question, but Harry

got so caught up in things, that I'm ready to write about the Dueling Club fiasco, and he still hasn't asked the twins about it.

I write to get the plot bunny out of my head. I post to get other's ideas of what is good, and what needs fixing. I'm out to enjoy myself, while I improve my writing, and as long as what you see me doing wrong is something I can fix, I will most certainly try.

Amidst the rush of packing for school, Harry pondered the things he'd learned over the summer concerning custody rules in the Wizarding world. He was very glad for the information he'd gathered concerning publicity, as it had helped with Lockhart. Speaking of the man, Harry wondered why his books were being used for Defense.

Just thinking about the course reminded the brunet that he hadn't yet done the assignment for his Defense class. Wondering why in the world he had taken so long to notice, he dared to ask Ron what the assignment ad been.

With a perplexed expression, the redhead said he wasn't exactly sure, and would have to ask one of the other incoming second years to find out. Not only did this tell Harry that Ron didn't know, it also made it clear Ron hadn't cared. Sighing to himself, the brunet resolved to working on that assignment on the train, amidst the reading he'd set to himself.

Finally, when the family prepared to leave, Harry was rather shocked to see them loading their supplies in to the trunk of the car the twins and Ron had used to rescue him from Privet Drive. He was even more amazed when they all nonchalantly climbed into the back seats, and Mrs. Weasely actually voiced respect for Muggles making cars look smaller than they actually were.

Just as he was about to say something, he caught the eyes of the twins, and oddly, Percy, and all three shook their heads, smirking. Not sure what to make of the usually anal-retentive, rule-touting Prefect bending a rule, Harry kept his thoughts to himself. Well, until he reminded himself of his Defense homework.

"Do any of you remember what the Defense professor assigned at the end of the year? I seem to have forgotten to do the project," Harry began.

The incredulous expressions startled him, and he tried to fathom what each one meant. Ron's, he suspected, was surprise at trying to learn from older sources. Percy was probably more than a little disgusted by someone letting it go this long, but he couldn't put a name to the faces the twins had.

"You didn't remember the assignment, Harry?" Fred raised an eyebrow.

"You're usually the first one done with your assignments, so that's rather strange," George added.

"I heard that he'd been through something rather traumatic at the end of the year," Percy clarified, "after you all left for the Hospital wing."

"What do you mean?" Ron bleated.

"I'm not certain of the details, but I heard that the Defense professor had snuck into the third floor corridor, and when confronted by the other professors, it turned into a fight." Percy's words caused a low buzzing in Harry's head.

"We were there until just before the fight then," Fred looked at his twin.

"How would Harry have had anything to do with it then?" George countered.

"That's where opinions diverge radically," Percy hesitated, spotting the uncomfortable expression on the dark-haired boy's face.

"I sort of remember standing there, with Fluffy asleep," Harry paused, "Then it gets fuzzy, and I remember waking in the Hospital wing."

"I think you saw more than your mind could cope with," Percy reassured the boy, "so it more or less erased what it couldn't handle. I'm almost willing to wager you don't even remember the man's name."

Blinking, the boy stopped to think about that challenge, and rather than spitting out the first name that came to mind, he actually thought about it. The more he thought, the more he realized the sixth year was right. He remembered the things he'd learned the year before, but no features. Spells but not a single reference to the man's appearance. The directions to the classroom, but no name.

"If you really want the memories back, you might have to talk to the Headmaster, as he may have assisted the memory block for you that your own mind was instigating." Percy completed the line of thought.

"But I'm still going to be held accountable for the Defense assignments!" Harry yelped.

Snorting, Percy rolled his eyes, "Don't count on it. He didn't announce it while we were in there, but Lockhart couldn't wait to brag after we left that he'd be teaching Defense this upcoming year, and it sounded like he wasn't aware that there were assignments that had even been given."

Realizing that the car was nearly to the train station, the older boys steered the conversation to other topics. It wasn't long before the twins and Ron were laughing at the details of the deal Harry had arranged with his relatives, though Percy's face had started seeming to have a permanent thoughtful expression on it. Not exactly inclined to think anything of it, Harry hoped it was a normal face for the young man to have, and that it wasn't guaranteed to cause him trouble later.

The redheaded clan and their dark-haired tagalong clambered out of the vehicle, unloading their trunks as they went. At first, the family seemed inclined to venture towards the platform in a cluster, but a quick question from Harry banished that idea.

"How are we to inconspicuously pass through the barrier if there's eight of us trying to reach it all at once?" He heard the stifled snicker behind him, and was mildly surprised to see that the twins, standing in front of him, weren't the source. As the parents of the redheads stared, Harry wondered why this had never occurred to them before.

"He's got a point, mother." Percy spoke up from behind Harry, and the small boy blinked triple speed in surprise, "After all, eight people clustered around a single pillar is much more suspicious than two or three approaching it at a time."

"All right then, Percy, since you approve so much, you and I will lead Ginny through, so she doesn't get lost." Mrs. Weasley grumbled a bit, and Harry didn't want to think too hard about her reasons why.

"Then Fred, George and I will go," Mr. Weasley waved at his twin sons, "So I can keep them out of trouble. Ron, Harry if you don't mind being the cabeese of this train, I'd appreciate it."

"Cabeese?" Ron was perplexed, and muttered under his breath.

Supposing that the Muggle-fascinated Ministry worker had meant to make a new word for the plural form of the ends of trains, Harry was only a little less confused by the term and suggested the idea to his friends' younger brother.

"Oh," Ron nodded, "I suppose that makes sense. A bit."

After waiting what they felt was the prerequisite time, the two headed for the platform, and realized with no small sense of panic, that they had a mere minute to make it through the barrier in order to catch the Hogwarts Express. With a mere fifteen seconds to go, they made it to the needed pillar and made a run for it.

The crashing noise they made, complete with Hedwig squawking, garnered more than a few stares, and the two boys sank to the ground in desperation, hoping that they were imagining things. After righting his things, and helping Harry to do the same, Ron leaned against the pillar with his trolley and whimpered when it still refused to let him through.

"Are you boys all right?" An attendant approached.

Paling, Harry nodded, "We just weren't looking where we were going in our rush and ran into the pillar."

"If you hurry, you might still catch the train on Platform Ten, it doesn't leave for another few minutes," the poor woman offered.

"Oh no," Ron whimpered again, "We've already missed our ride."

"Oh dear," holding a hand to her mouth, the attendant pointed, "There's a phone kiosk near the restrooms, if you need to call someone."

"Thank you ma'am," Harry nodded, with a gentle smile, "We'll pull ourselves together and then we'll work it out."

Nodding with a smile of her own, the attendant left them in peace. Ron was thunking his head into the pillar, not seeming to care for the brain cells he was killing with each impact, though the brunet bit his tongue to keep silent on the matter of neural genocide.

"Mum's gonna kill me," Ron groaned.

"Why would she do that, she'll know we didn't miss the train on purpose," Harry shrugged and started for the way they came.

"Wait, where are you going?" Ron yelped and tried to catch up.

"I was going to wait by the car for your parents to return," Harry blinked.

"THE CAR!!" Ron yelped some more, jumping up and down a bit, "I never thought I'd say this, Potter, but you're a genius! We'll just take the car to the school. If we're lucky, we'll get there about the same time as the train and no one will ever know any better."

"I doubt it, Weasley," for once, Harry felt safe using the surname. His estimation of the intelligence of the youngest male of that family had just sunk to a new low.

"What? Why not?" Ron glared.

"For one, your brothers will have noticed. I'm fairly sure that Granger and Malfoy will have noticed, and with them, most of our respective houses of our year. From there, I will leave you to do the math," Harry snapped.

"Well, I'm still going to take the car," Ron grumbled as he kept going, "See you there, Potter, if you ever make it."

"Your choice," Harry shook his head and found a bench. Digging in his pocket for any possible Muggle change, he wasn't surprised to not find any, but knew he'd need to have tried. He'd been hoping he could find a directory with which to find a number to call, but without any money, even that was moot.

Sitting for a while, the boy quickly became bored. A thought occurred to him and he spoke to his owl, only feeling a little foolish, "Hedwig, do you think you could carry a message to the school for me?"

A low hoot and the owl hopped in her cage. With a small grin, the boy quickly found a kind soul willing to lend him a sheet of paper, and a pen, and he scribbled out a message. He didn't address it to anyone specific, but made it clear what his problem was, and that he hadn't meant to miss the train. Returning the pen to its owner, Harry folded it, so that it made its own envelope, more or less.

Quietly, and trying not to make a spectacle of himself, the boy found his way to an open window. Upon reaching it, he pushed it just a bit further open, and then opened his owl's cage. Looking around to make sure he had no audience, the boy tied the letter to her leg and asked her to get to Hogwarts quickly as possible. He asked her to get the letter to Professor Snape if she could, but if McGonagall got it, he wouldn't complain, just so long as it wasn't the Headmaster. He knew the old man would get the message eventually, he just didn't want the line of communication to be that direct. He got the feeling that if it was, then no one else would ever get any details.

Wishing her luck, Harry let his owl go when he was sure no one was looking. After closing her cage back up and returning to his bench, the boy fidgeted, wondering if he was going to miss the first night back entirely. He was starting to think he should have joined the impetuous redhead in the flying car when he heard grumbling from the people in the station.

"Some yahoo is reporting that he's seen a car flying through the air a few miles North of here," the boy overheard. With a wince, Harry changed his mind again, knowing that the Gryffindor was going to be lucky if he still could attend Hogwarts after this stunt. He also took

note of the conversationalists' features. He was sure they would be Memory Charmed, but if he could help, he'd try. After all, he wanted to forget the day's events, so he begrudging no one else if they should desire the same.

Even with occasional tidbits about Ron's car ride, Harry got painfully bored. Enough so that he apparently made quite the pitiful picture to adults passing by. A few asked him if he was waiting for his parents to pick him up. Others asked if such a little boy was sure he was big enough to ride the train on his own. Frankly, the twelve-year-old wanted to scream that he was diminutive, not that young, short, not stupid, and nearly blind, not completely deaf.

However, when someone handed him a small, stubby pencil, and a sticky note pad, the boy could have blessed them, their children, and their grandchildren if he'd dared to. After a momentary debate over the entertainment value of decorating surfaces with the notes, Harry decided to draw on each sheet before doing anything with the tiny square of paper in question.

Five squares later, and a rough map of Hogwarts from memory, and the boy was again about to scream from boredom. He'd done his research concerning the cartographic charms Moony from the Marauders' Map had mentioned and yet was no closer to figuring out how to charm the lines of his own map to move like the staircases, or even like the representations of them in the Map did.

He became so lost in trying to figure this out, without books, without notes, that it was with complete and utter shock that he realized someone was standing behind him, staring over his shoulder at his notes on sticky papers.

Yipping, the boy whirled around to peer at the person, and yipped yet again as he recognized the Potions Master. The smirk on the man's face did little to reassure the boy, but as the expression seemed more directed at the sticky notes than the child, Harry relaxed. Just a hair.

"Well, Potter, should I ask what you're getting up to now, having missed the train entirely?" the man's drawl settled the boy's nerves a bit more, as there was no anger directed at the boy present.

"Sir. When Ron and I tried to catch the train, the path was closed. We wound up running directly into the pillar separating Platforms nine and ten instead of reaching our destination," the boy tried as he spoke to think of how to say what he meant without the exact words, so that it wouldn't give too many things away to eavesdropping Muggles.

The Slytherin Head of House nodded just a touch, which told Harry his message had been conveyed. Only time would tell if it was the exact message the Second Year had tried for. Pointing vaguely at the sticky notes, Snape asked, "And what project is this?"

"I was bored silly waiting for someone to show up." Harry shrugged, then peeled each paper off the table one by one. "Someone else in the station was kind enough to give them and a tiny pencil to me, I think they knew I was about to do something... rather Gryffindorish, sir."

A low, quiet chuckle was his reward for the anecdote. Looking around, the man gestured for the boy to stand and gather his things, "Come along, Mister Potter. We still need to get you to the school. Your owl is, the last I heard, happily in the Owlery, enjoying some well-earned food. She did remarkably well in getting to the school as quick as she did, and was rather adamant that I get the message. I suspect that had to do with you."

Nodding, the boy explained, "I figured that if anyone was going to learn any details about the trip they'd be asked to make, even if it's just to tell me I've been expelled for this, it'd be better if you or Professor McGonagall got the note. You because I figure, as my Head of House you'd be the poor soul sent, and her because. Well. Sir, this sounds sad to say, but I have to. As far as I can tell, Gryffindors can't keep secrets, and I thought if she read it, she'd have the instant, thought to mouth reflex, and there wouldn't be a pause to process."

The snort from his Professor, made Harry feel a little relief from the constant worry of being told he was going back to the Dursleys now.

The man's response, however, did not, "She's more gifted at keeping secrets than you suspect, child. It's the young Gryffindors that have serious cases of foot in mouth syndrome, and your own symptoms of it lead me to believe your parents have more of an influence than we knew."

"Sorry sir?" Harry wasn't sure exactly what he was apologizing for, but figured it was better safe than sorry. Well, sorrier, that is.

"Relax, Mister Potter, you're not being expelled. You've only managed to miss the Express, and if we hurry, you might make it to the school before your school mates anyway."

With that, the adult led the child to an area of the station that wasn't quite so full of travelers, and looking around, nodded, "This is called Side-Along Apparition, Mister Potter, and I won't tell you it will be comfortable. There's a good chance you won't like it at all, but there's nothing to be done about it."

"Yes sir," Harry nodded as the man reached out to his shoulder, held on firmly, and concentrated. Shortly after, the boy felt like he'd been squished and rolled into a small ball, stuffed into a straw, and shunted through it like a blow dart. As he opened his eyes again, the small boy looked around in surprise. He didn't recognize the place at all, but it felt the same way the school and Wizarding London did. "Where are we?"

"This is Hogsmeade," the professor looked around. Spotting what he was looking for, he guided the child to the outskirts of the town, explaining as he went. "If you're fortunate, next year you will see more of this village. For now, content yourself with this. We are on our way to the school through the carriages. You would have ridden one to the school this year anyway, but now your trip will be just that bit longer."

As they approached the carriage with the school's crest on it, Harry blinked rapidly at the creatures harnessed to the front. They looked like horses at first glance, but that second glance was what puzzled the boy. Instead of the short fur horses have, these quadrupeds were

covered in scales. They also seemed to have wings, which further perplexed him. "Sir, sorry to bother you, but what are those?"

"What are what, Mister Potter," the reserve in the man's voice drew Harry's attention from the not-quite-horses, to the man himself.

"The almost-horses harnessed to the carriage, sir," Harry pointed, "The creatures with scales and wings that most definitely aren't pegasi."

The deep sigh worried the boy almost as much as thoughts of being expelled had earlier, and with that, he flinched. Sure he was about to be yelled at or insulted, he nearly fell to the ground as his trunk was hoisted to the roof of the carriage away from him, and his question answered at the same time. "Those are Thestrals Mister Potter, and I was hoping you wouldn't be able to see them."

"Sir?" Harry climbed into the carriage as the professor indicated, and sat, "What do you mean, you were hoping I wouldn't be able to see them? Doesn't everyone?"

"No," Looking outside, the man seemed to be just that little bit gloomier than usual, and it worried the boy some more. "Most people can't see them. Do a little research in the library come the formal start of the term, and you'll know why. I suppose that it was too much to hope you'd still be fortunate enough to not see them, what with the events at the end of last term."

"Events?" Harry blinked again, "All I remember is seeing you, Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout, dueling with Professor... What was his name?"

Though he strained his ears, the child couldn't hear the Potions Master mumbling to himself, but he thought he heard the words 'Memory Charm' and couldn't help but be curious. He kept it to himself though, as the carriage had reached the front of the school.

As they climbed out, the Slytherin Head of House informed his student to leave his belongings, the House Elves would collect them. Remembering a House Elf from earlier, the boy quickly recounted his

issues with 'Dobby,' and asked the man if he knew anything. Blinking slowly, the adult informed the child that the House Elf in question might not be a matter of consequence for much longer. He had an idea of what the tiny Slytherin was speaking of, but knew he could do little to nothing about the matter.

So, he cautioned the child, warning him to be careful, else the Elf's actions could be repeated, in efforts to try and force the decision to leave the school. In an effort to lighten the mood, he mentioned to Harry that he'd keep an eye out for Ford Anglia's in the air that night, and off the boy's own arrival.

Reaching the Great Hall, the two Slytherins trekked directly for their table in the Hall, and leaving Harry to sit, Snape stalked off to search the area, for a wild car, or a red-headed individual who might as well be given the same moniker.

After a bit, the rest of the students from second year and up filed into the Great Hall, and no small count flustered at the sight of him already there, waiting. Those that actually knew him seemed relieved. Oddly, this included Percy at the Gryffindor table, as well as a portion of the Quidditch team. Quickly he informed Slytherin that he'd relate the story in the Common Room later, but did still want to go to bed early.

Crowding around the brunet, Malfoy hissed, "Where were you, Potter?"

"I missed the train," Harry hissed back, "Shush, they're about to start the Sorting!"

Even though he made it sound like he was excited for the Sorting, Harry was actually more than a little distracted. He was hoping that Ron had made it safely to Hogwarts. Mostly for the twins' sake, but the time spent at the Burrow had given Harry a little insight on the Gryffindor second year. Having five older brothers left the other boy with quite a complex. Head Boy, Prefect, Quidditch players, and pranksters extraordinaire, and what could Ron do to measure up?

Though Harry suspected expulsion would normally be the result of an escapade like this, he was also figuring that Dumbledore's decision would be merely to take points and give out detentions, if that. While he was pondering this, other Slytherins attempted to wheedle information from one another about the Daily Prophet article that had been published that day. It had a rather odd report of Muggles sighting a car in the air, flying along a Northerly route.

A hissing from his left suddenly captured Harry's attention. Looking in that direction, he spotted Snape more or less dragging a reluctant and sheepish Ron towards the Gryffindor table. The others at the Gryffindor table crowded around the redhead, and in turn, the other Slytherins pointed their gazes at Harry.

"Yes, they're connected," Harry sighed. By this time, the last first year had been Sorted, and the Headmaster stood.

"Welcome all of you to Hogwarts. Those of you returning, I say welcome back, and our newest students, enjoy your first glimpses of the school. I should like to say a few words of greeting to our new Defense Professor, Gilderoy Lockhart, and to inform all of you that as usual, the Forbidden Forest is just that. I have been informed that there has been a rather large crash between the Whomping Willow and a flying vehicle, the likes of which the school has never seen before, and with any luck, will never see again. The driver of the vehicle has been thoroughly chastised, and points have been taken away. Caretaker Filch has posted, on his door, all additional items that students are not allowed to have on Hogwarts grounds. Lastly, I would like to welcome all of you to dig in and eat your fill."

After eating a little food, Harry noticed that the rest of the Slytherins were still paying him entirely too much attention. Luckily, Malfoy noticed this as well, and began poking fun of the youngest Weasley male. This drew most of the Slytherins' focus to the blonde, and Harry felt safe to continue eating.

As he finished his meal, Flint spoke up, "Well, Potter, do you have the notes you threatened us with?"

"Not with me now," Harry shook his head, then continued to munch his way through cooked carrots.

"Got any interesting tidbits to share with us now?" Bletchley mumbled around his helping of green beans.

"The people around where I live think I attend a school for violent children," Harry shrugged.

The silence that sentence was met with shocked the small boy. He'd figured that at least half of the table was listening to Malfoy by now, and very few were still paying any heed to Harry. Judging by the ringing in his ears, Harry knew he'd either been painfully wrong, or just as painfully optimistic. With a deep sigh, the small boy resigned himself to more questions he didn't want to answer.

"Now why would they do that, Potter?" Pucey asked.

"I'm going to answer that later, if you don't mind," Harry stalled.

"Actually we do," Warrington stood, his meal finished. The older boy was quickly pulled back down to sit at the table. No one had been dismissed yet from the Great Hall.

With a hiss, Warrington continued, "When they let us go, you're coming with us to decide whether or not you're trying out for Quidditch, but while we're at it, I'm curious to know what exactly your relatives think they're up to."

The nods surrounding them warned Harry that unless he wanted to be painfully harassed, he'd better answer their questions quickly once they were all allowed to leave the Great Hall.

In a twist, Harry thought, of fate, the Headmaster stood again, wished everyone good night, and bid the Prefects to guide everyone to their Houses. The older years not acting as Head Boy and Girl, and Prefects simply led their younger classmates to the respective Common Rooms. Plainly, Harry was trapped by the older Slytherins, and knew he was about to get chewed out for withholding information. He also knew they were going to grill him on the details of his

summer in general, and particularly how it ended. Not that they wouldn't make sure of the Muggle details he had collected, but it seemed like right now was also going to be the time they used to find out why he would know anything about Ron's trip.

Knowing that the older years would be dismissed from the room quickly, the cluster of older students dragged Harry to one of the older boys' rooms. The cluster circled around him and gently, though insistently shoved him to rest on one of the beds.

"Okay now, Potter, speak," Flint snapped.

"I'm still working out some of the details, but events over the summer led to my being at the Weasleys' house for a few days. So I was with them trying to board the train. Somehow the path was sealed, leaving Ron and I on the wrong side." Harry was stalling for time, and he was sure all the others knew it, which was why he was allowed to try. "I reminded him of a car his dad owned, and he took that as a sign to use it to get to Hogwarts. I waited, after sending a message with my owl, for someone to pick me up."

"That's nice to know, now what's with your relatives?" Bole tapped a shoe, eyebrow raised.

"That's part of what I'm trying to work out." Harry had a sudden thought, and tried a new tactic, "If you give me a good reason to tell you all about it, I will. Otherwise, I'm going to bed now, and I'll have to get back to you on the Quidditch thing."

Apparently his bargaining tactics were so brash, brazen, and off-the-wall that none of the older students even tried to catch him as he dashed out. Thus he missed the calculating looks on their faces. If he'd seen them, he might have decided to be afraid, to be very, very afraid.

Reaching his own floor, Harry scurried into his sleeping clothes and under his covers to sleep, or fake it, so fast, he forgot one of the questions he wanted to ask the Potions Professor.

I write to get the plot bunny out of my head. I post to get other's ideas of what is good, and what needs fixing. I'm out to enjoy myself, while I improve my writing, and as long as what you see me doing wrong is something I can fix, I will most certainly try.

What if?

Waking up the next morning, Harry just barely remembered to gather the notes he'd made of how people had behaved in Privet Drive, where the Dursleys had spread their tale of where Harry went to school, and of the reactions of Muggle Londoners. He walked to the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, and would have sat in his usual spot, but First Years had taken it. Malfoy sat in his second usual spot, and if Harry had been a little more confident, he'd have told the First Years to move over. If he'd been less confident, though, he would have figured that it was a conspiracy of some kind. As it was, he sighed, and moved to the Quidditch Players' seats and plunked himself down.

As he was finishing the last of his toast, roughly all he had the stomach for at that point, the Slytherin team arrived. The silence of the rest of the table made the brunet nervous, and though he tried desperately not to, Harry could feel himself scrunch into himself at the feeling of the older boys staring into his back.

"So, Potter," Flint spoke up as he sat, across from the small second year, "does this mean you're trying out for Seeker?"

"I was thinking about it," Harry shrugged.

"Well, just keep in mind, your success will determine our playing style," Bole added from Harry's left.

"I'm really sitting here because my old seat was snatched by Firsties, and my other favored seat is occupied as well. I didn't feel like starting anything this early in the morning. Or this early in the year, for that matter." Harry reached into his pouch of supplies, pulled out the thin sheaf of paper, and sat, putting the pages into order.

"Potter, please tell me you haven't written a dissertation already," Derrick, on his right, whimpered in fake fear.

"Nope." Harry made sure the stack was even, then handed it to Flint, "Here. Make what you will of it. If you read it, and still feel the same, that's your decision. At least it will be a better informed one."

Bole smirked suddenly and asked, "Are you bitter about last year, Potter?"

"I'm working on it," Harry shrugged.

"Oh, so this is what you were threatening us with at the end of last term," Bletchley actually had the nerve to steal the entire sheaf from Flint as he sat on the Captain's left.

Shrugging at the theft, the Quidditch Captain merely settled into eating the food off of his plate, and peering at the Second Year with narrowed eyes, "What little I saw of that wasn't good, Potter. You sure you want us to see that?"

"I told you then I wasn't trying to make you guys into goody two shoes," Harry mumbled, "So I wrote down the good the bad, the ugly, the nitty gritty. Even the pathetic."

"Wait," Bletchley's interruption made everyone at the table listen, subtly or not, and Harry froze, "It says here that your relatives have told everyone in their neighborhood you're attending a school for criminal children. You mentioned that the neighbors thought that, but didn't say who told them."

"That's the story they've told," Harry nodded.

"I thought you were leaving bits out," Flint hissed, "You told us they didn't like you and you didn't like them either, but to tell lies about you-"

"They told me my mother and father were killed drunk driving." Harry stood as he spoke, gathered what was left of his things, and only as he stalked toward the doors, realized that he'd just committed himself to one of the two plans he'd made for the way he'd live this year out. Mentally shrugging, Harry crossed off the details of the second and decided to iron out the rest of the details of this one as he went. His first step would be class, though he would need to find a way to communicate with Professor Snape concerning the possibility of finding new lodgings after the year's end.

Just as the boy reached the doors leading out of the Great Hall, a hush fell upon the students as the owls flew in with their deliveries. One old, decrepit owl flew in front of Ron. Having spent a few weeks in the Burrow, Harry recognized Erroll, and was about to ask himself what message it could be, when it began screaming.

At the end of the message, Harry felt sorrier for Mr. Weasley than he had before, and made a note to write an apology to the man for not doing better to talk his son out of the idiot stunt. Shaking his head, Harry continued on to his first class of the day.

While he waited for the rest of the students to show up, Harry gave his Charms text a second glance over. He wondered if the professor was going to quiz them over the assignments from the end of the year or not. Finally, he noticed other Slytherins trickling in to the room, and Harry smirked at Malfoy, who had seemed like he was going to sit in Harry's old seat. He figured the blonde was going to do this in every class, and had every intention of fighting back. Not sure how yet, but he didn't intend to just take it.

The tiny man teaching the class arrived into the room shortly after it filled with students, and he hopped up to his podium and greeted his students. He, however, was greeted with groans because he informed them of the quiz he'd sent to their desks, to test what they recalled from last year. After completing the quiz, they'd move straight to their first Charm for the year, and go from there. As he moved about the room, he collected the assignments from the students.

Upon reaching Harry's elbow, the diminutive, yet bouncy individual whispered to him, "I have an independent project for you Mister Potter, if you'd like to take me up on it."

At the boy's nod, an extra page of paper appeared on Harry's desk. At the top it read: Read after the quiz. So, the boy followed instructions and finished the quiz first. Since he'd been reading his second year text ahead of time, Harry wasn't really surprised to see most of the spells on it. His guess, based on what he knew of last year, and what he'd read of this years texts, was that First year was

spent learning the basics of the spells. Second year was spent tuning the strengths of those same spells and learning stronger varieties that carried out the same tasks. Such as the Hovering Charm, a more powerful version of the Levitation Charm would be taught to second years, perhaps after they gained more control over their use of the latter.

When he finished the quiz, Harry turned it over, and with a little thrill, saw the paper fly off towards the Professor's desk. Flitwick was the only professor that used that spell, so Harry had yet to get sick of it. McGonagall had her students pass to the right by rows, and then that column would pass papers forward. Snape chose to have each student bring their quizzes personally to his desk, and Sprout, on her rare paper quizzes, asked for students to drop them into a box in the back of the room or the Greenhouse. Though he couldn't remember the man's name, Harry thought the old Defense instructor would walk up to each student's desk to collect the tests.

Turning his thoughts from the professor with no name, Harry read the independent study suggestion from Flitwick and froze. Blinking a couple times, he reread it. 'Duplication charms are a complicated set of spells, usually taught in third year at the earliest. They range from the Duplicator of objects, to complex spells that simulate the Muggle process known as cloning. Your assignment would be to research all varieties of said family, and document their strengths, weaknesses, durabilities, and any legal repercussions of using them. This assignment would be a progressive one, and you will check in regularly to record your progress. By the end of the year, you will have enough information to decide on how long a parchment you want to turn in, and I will desire that you run it through several editors for spelling, grammar, and factuality.'

As he read and reread it, Harry became more and more sure that Professor Snape at the least, and perhaps even Madam Pince, whom Harry had forgotten to formally apologize to last year, were behind this project. It did intrigue him though, so Harry could easily see himself working on it. He could also see using the information to help in the projects with the twins. Seeing as he wasn't going to change anyone's mind on Slytherins with the track he'd tried last year, Harry

felt it would be better to talk the twins into turning the prank projects to products.

His attention was drawn to the front of the room when the Professor began his lecture. Harry tried, really he did, not to laugh when the lecture turned out to be about Hovering Charms, but it was really difficult. Of course, at the same time, he wanted to cry, but that was a completely different matter entirely.

Apparently his attempts at not laughing failed, as he had garnered enough of Flitwick's attention to get called up to the front of the class. Hoping he wouldn't be making a habit of this, Harry gave the Hovering Charm a try.

The difference between Levitation and Hovering, as far as Harry had read was a matter of both control and strength. The former was meant for light objects, so control was of very little import. The latter, however, was meant to be used on things from the weight of a book, to the weight of a small child. Thus, it required more control. Levitation was rarely used on humans, while Hovering could be. Who wanted the person casting the Hover Charm on you to suddenly send you careening into the wall on your right?

Though it wasn't easy, and no where near pretty, Harry did manage to cast the Hovering Charm in front of the class. He felt a little vindictive pleasure at his success, since he'd been charged with casting one roughly a month ago, but hadn't ever done so until that day. The expression on his face must have changed, as Crabbe asked about it when he sat back down.

"What are you, er, smirking for, Potter?" The larger boy edged from him just a hair.

"Oh," Harry smiled, trying to take the edge off his expression, "Someone cast a Hovering Charm where I live this summer, and it was blamed on me. I hadn't ever cast it until today, and so it's nice to actually be able to cast the spell I was accused of."

A snort and chuckle accompanied this statement, as both Crabbe and Goyle enjoyed the humor and irony. Asked to assist his classmates,

Harry worked with those two first, and by the time he got them to be successful, most of the rest of the class was as well, and the class was also over.

"I have to ask," Harry made sure Malfoy wasn't listening, "Why are you two still friendly to me, as obviously, Malfoy has decided to try to erase me?"

"Oh, that," Crabbe smirked as he packed.

"He's just gotten told he's supposed to rule Slytherin. Or take over from Flint. He took it into his head that it meant he was supposed to keep you hemmed in." Goyle shook his head.

"Ah," Harry shrugged, "He's welcome to the leadership role, I'm done trying to make you guys do anything. Now I just want to provide you all with enough information to make a decision on your own."

"Sure, Potter, and I'll believe that about the same time as I'll believe that Veelas are ever male," Zabini piped up from behind the smaller boy, though without any malice.

The next class, Herbology, should have been similar to the first, but for two rather important things. First, Professor Sprout was rather grumpily stalking to the Greenhouse, hands full of bandages, and second, Lockhart was trailing behind her, blathering on about 'the best way to mend Whomping Willows.' Harry thought he heard the Hufflepuff Head of House mutter under her breath about how he hadn't even been at Hogwarts when the tree had been planted so it was likely his first sighting of such a tree.

Hoping desperately not to be spotted, Harry stood very still, as he knew that fidgeting would only catch the magpie's eye like glittering, shiny things always do. Sadly, Harry's scar must have been glittery enough for the man, as he stopped trying to convince the Herbology Professor that he knew more than she, and suddenly veered for the Slytherin cluster of students with a grin on his face.

"I knew you'd try something newsworthy, Potter," his grin sent a chill through Harry's blood. The wagging finger didn't help matters any,

but the man's face alone set the poor boy to wishing he could hide, "After all, you'd had to pass up your chance at front page of the Prophet glory with me, and no one wants to be shown up."

Sighing, as the man had obviously developed selective memory, Harry was about to correct the man as to why he'd not participated in the publicity stunt when Professor Sprout spoke up, "I do apologize, Professor Lockhart, but don't you have a class to teach in your classroom?"

The boys in the room smirked, chuckled, or snickered, while the girls gave reluctant sighs. Looking to his old class partner, Harry was rather disappointed to see that Parkinson was just like any other girl, and had been moon calving after the fop as well.

"Now, we shall start the year off with a bang, so to say," Sprout passed around a box, with the instructions that each student was to take a pair of earmuffs. She then demonstrated the proper way to place them upon one's head, and explained, "We will be repotting Mandrakes today, and as the cry of an adult can kill, I want you all in the habit of taking the proper care in regards to them. Thus, every time you are to work with them, we will be wearing these. Right now, they're infants, and their screams will only cause unconsciousness, but it's better to get into good habits early."

She demonstrated the proper way to repot a Mandrake and then told the class to separate into pairs. In a surprise move, Longbottom walked straight over to Harry and asked to work with him. Blinking, Harry acquiesced, and wondered how out of sorts Parkinson would be later. During the repotting, Harry took notice of how the Gryffindor cared for the plants, and was rather amazed at how well they reacted. He'd thought he had a pretty good understanding of plants, thanks and no thanks at the same time to the Dursleys, but Longbottom seemed to have a natural green thumb. Not that Harry was going to complain. It might even help him to work out the study group he was still hoping to implement between houses at some point.

When the Mandrakes were replanted in their soil and covered sufficiently that the earmuffs could be removed, Sprout continued her

lecture about the properties of Mandrakes, their roots, and how to use their natural defenses to one's own benefits.

Taking notes as he listened, Harry almost didn't notice when a small note found its way into his pile of notes. When the Professor paused for a gulp of water, Harry stopped taking notes long enough to read the message, and began wondering why Longbottom would choose him of all people to work with on an independent project. Harry wouldn't mind the chance to personally pick the boy's mind more thoroughly on Herbology, and have a proper excuse for it. It was rather strange in the green-eyed boy's mind to associate himself with the Gryffindor who happened to be nearly hopeless in any class other than Herbology, though.

Quietly meeting the brown eyes of his new partner, Harry nodded, but wrote on the note, that he had 'a lot of questions to ask before making it concrete or anything.'

As the class ended, Harry was stopped by Longbottom handing him another bit of paper, which read, similarly to the one Flitwick had given him. 'There are a great deal of Mandrakes to be cared for, and as I am both Professor and Head of a House, I have very little time to tend to them. I would like to ask a few students to take care of them on the side of their own schedules. Each of these students will have a pass to do this observation. The pass in question will allow said student to be caught by Filch, a Professor of Hogwarts, a Prefect, the Head Boy, the Head Girl, or by the Headmaster up to twice in any combination, after curfew. If you get caught out after those two times, you will get into trouble as anyone else would.' It also had a jotted note from the other boy, reading, 'I asked if I could have a partner for this, and she said it was okay. Since you have helped me in Potions, I hoped I could return the favor for Herbology. This is supposed to boost our grades by at least one measure.'

With that, Harry felt it was fairly safe to accept the offer. Nodding again at the heavier boy, Harry scurried off to the Great Hall for lunch, hoping to stay out of Lockhart's path from there on out. Outside of classes, that was. He had no choice in regards to the actual time spent in class.

At lunch, Harry managed to claim a seat just outside of the Quidditch players' and was more than a little perplexed when Zabini plunked himself down to his left. As the smaller boy finished eating, he started to pull a text out, complete with notes.

"So, what's going on?" Zabini's question out of seeming thin air caused Harry to pause, blink and look at him wryly.

"I've been given two projects already this year, so I'm doing as much ahead of time for other classes as possible. I don't want to fall behind, you know, certainly wouldn't do to lose my Raven of Slytherin status." Harry scribbled more notes even as he spoke, wanting to avoid the topic he knew was coming anyway.

"No, I meant why are you giving up on your crusade from last year?" Zabini explained.

Having thought the feast from last year would have made that clear, Harry just paused. He then tried to find a way to say what he wanted to say without being too rude. After a bit, he gave up, and left the table, muttering, "Ask the Quidditch team if you really want to know, they can say it better than I can."

With the extra time on his hands, Harry made a trip to the dungeons, to drop off the extra paperwork he'd accumulated. While digging around in his trunk, Harry made sure to snag blank papers to take notes from the History text with, as that class was next.

After reaching the room where the ghost taught, Harry found his seat, knowing he was early enough to keep the same one, and opened the book. He began taking notes from the last point they'd reached in the text the year before and almost didn't notice when the class started. The only reason he knew was the huff from Malfoy as the other boy walked in, and found Harry already sitting.

He was so lost in his own world of notes that he never heard the quiet thumps of his classmates' hands and heads as they fell asleep. As he'd said to the goblins in Gringotts' he had no idea how Binns could make the goblin rebellions so boring, as it really was fascinating to read about the how's and whys of the wars. There were even cultural

references in the stories, ones that he'd never heard of existing in Binns' lectures. Before reading of the rebellion of 410 C.E., Harry had never known that one could tell a goblin's rank in society -that of the goblins of course- by where the verb in their name was in translation.

Thinking about it, Harry realized that that meant Griphook was a different rank from Frognock. Since the book didn't specify exactly what the order meant, Harry could only speculate, based on his human understanding of bank ranking, that Frognock would be a lower rank than Griphook. He had to wonder, though, where Steelknife's rank fell, as Harry didn't think the first half of his name was meant to be a verb, but an adjective.

Somewhere along the way, Harry realized that the sawing noise in the room wasn't from the tales of the book finally coming to life, but from a sleeping student forgetting not to snore. This made him snap out of his consideration of the goblin rankings. He spotted Binns, who seemed to actually be hearing the snores.

"Since it seems that none of you are actually conscious enough to listen to the lecture," the ghost cut itself off, "I will release you earlier than usual. You will still be responsible for the material I would have covered today, so do study diligently." With that, it floated out of the room through the ceiling.

Debating the wisdom of leaving the class to sleep, Harry stood. Granger was also standing up to leave. He noticed that most of the class was also asleep. He suspected that the only reason Parkinson wasn't was because she'd been doodling in her notebook all period. Sighing to himself, Harry decided to have mercy on his Housemates, and dropped his History text onto his desk. The resulting noise catapulted more than a few students from their seats to the floor.

"Professor Binns dismissed class because someone was snoring loud enough to wake the dead," Granger sniffed.

"We're still going to be held accountable for what the lecture should have been," Harry grumbled as he finished packing and left the room.

Taking the time to make a dash for the Junior Marauders HQ, Harry quickly voiced the password, and slipped inside the room. Glad for the House Elves, Harry noticed the lack of dust immediately. Next, he spotted the sheaves of paper the twins had copied from the Alchemy texts. Warily stalking over to them, Harry wondered what state the book copies would be in.

Reaching to one, with a fake wand prototype, Harry flipped it open. After a few seconds, he dared to peer over at the actual pages, and groaned. He'd managed to copy portions of the first one, but none of the second, by hand before the year's end, and was now depressed by all the lost information. The pages of the copied text now read, 'These pages are copyrighted, and as a student I should know better than to plagiarize. Madam Pince has rightfully copy protected the pages of all books in her care. Violators beware. First offense is forgiven, but any past that...' Just the wording gave Harry the shivers.

He left a note for the twins regarding both the books, and the plan he was hoping to set up for their projects that year. Noting that it was nearing time for him to head to his next class, Harry quickly left the room, making sure no one saw, and dashed to Transfiguration.

In McGonagall's room, Harry noted that Malfoy had taken a leaf from his book and reached class early. Having plunked himself down in the seat Harry had used the year before, the boy had an expression on his face, that if Harry had been older, he'd have had the perfect name for.

Grumbling under his breath, Harry made sure there was time for this minor confrontation, and then proceeded to sit directly next to the blonde, as neither Crabbe nor Goyle had shown up yet. "Okay, Malfoy, this has to stop. You're not going to give anyone the idea that you're suddenly top dog of our year by taking my seat in classes. You're just going to show people how far you have to go to grow up."

"If you can't keep your seat, no one has any need to show you any respect, now do they?" the other boy drawled.

"Respect is earned," Harry snapped.

"And you haven't yet," was the response.

"What makes you think you have? For that matter, what makes you think anyone was showing me any undue respect?" Harry hissed, "This year, I'm just trying to give everyone else in our House as much information as possible so they can decide to dislike Muggles for something they know about them, rather than because their parents said to."

"You're really trying to make us like them, admit it, Potter," the blonde growled back.

"Actually, right about now, I couldn't care less whether you guys like them or not. I just don't want you to hate them as abstract concepts of inferiority. If you're gonna dislike them, you'll know something about them to specifically dislike." Harry rolled his eyes.

The eye roll was returned by his apparent rival. "Oh really? Prove it."

"My relatives told our entire neighborhood that I go to a school for juvenile delinquents. Rather than taking the time to learn any facts, - sound familiar yet- the neighbors chose to swallow the information like a juice drink, and all of them gave me sour looks all break." Harry grumbled. "For that, I can't stand the Muggles that live near me.

"Then why are you so determined to give us this information? I don't see it as helping your cause any," Malfoy seemed to actually be listening now.

"I've already said, I don't care if you like them or not." Harry groaned, "I just want you to dislike them for a reason other than 'my daddy said to!'"

"What makes you so sure that's my only reason?" Malfoy hissed.

"No one's ever said anything more than, 'my father said this,' or 'my mother told me that' in my hearing," Harry crossed his arms in front of his chest, "So all I know is that your parents say to hate Muggles."

"You've read the history books, you have to know what would happen if they knew about us," Malfoy thumped the desk in front of him.

Rolling his eyes, Harry countered, "Yeah, I've read the history texts. I know about the American's Salem Witch Trials. I also know about the European Inquisition. I also know that the Death Eaters' actions would only justify those reactions in the minds of the Muggles if they knew. If we presented a good face to them, they might not pull Witch Trials on us, or they might still do that. But we certainly aren't helping matters by letting people flip them upside down and whirl them like a washing machine on spin cycle."

"I'm not even going to pretend I understood your metaphor, Potter," Malfoy grumped.

Harry would have continued the argument with the blonde, but classmates were slowly trickling in, and the Professor was stalking into the room as well. McGonagall certainly wouldn't have allowed their discussion during her time. She'd have probably said it was better suited to History, or even Muggle Studies, not that the two boys yet knew the latter class existed.

Other than the argument, the class went on much the same as last year. McGonagall set them to changing chalk sticks into knitting needles as review from last year to start.

While the majority of the class fumbled through, Harry, Malfoy, Granger, and oddly, Zabini accomplished their projects quickly enough to be set to reversing the process as well. As she looped around the room, McGonagall gave tips and pointers to those struggling, and bits of encouragement to those who were making good progress. Of course, for students like Crabbe, Goyle, and Ron, she could only do so much, but still, the effort was the point, right?

As she passed Harry, a sheet of paper appeared on his desk. Grimacing at the sight of it, Harry began to wonder if there was a conspiracy going on. This was the third project he'd been given, even if one was indirectly. 'The process of Transfiguring inanimate objects to animate is a complicated process, rivaled by that of the reverse. Third years learn to Transfigure pincushions into hedgehogs. It has

been brought to my attention that you managed this somewhat successfully. Thus, my challenge to you is to research this process further, and successfully transfigure an inanimate object into an animate one, that moves and behaves as the animal it should be mimicking. From there, it shouldn't be too much of a challenge to transfigure one animate creature into another, so the second half of the project is researching this process as well.'

Even without any other classes going this route, Harry saw himself spending a great deal of time in the Library that year, and was resigned to having a cramped hand to boot. Spotting Granger reading as well, Harry wondered how many students got such projects.

Finally everyone had managed a passable chalk stick to knitting needle and back, and McGonagall felt it was time to move on. "At the end of last year, you all began practicing Transfiguring larger objects into smaller, and some even began researching the process of Transfiguring the smaller into larger. This term we will begin that process again, and continue until it is fairly comfortable to all of you to make a chair into a spindle, or to manipulate a tea cup until it can substitute as an entire china set."

Taking notes as the professor spoke, Harry wondered just how much he'd incidentally skipped in his work with the twins. If he was going to be researching so much, and using it for Marauders' benefit, how would he find time for Quidditch? If he wasn't going to play, the team would continue as they always had, but that would sadden the boy to no end to see the work from last year going more or less to waste. At the same time, he had no clue how he would tie in two research projects, a plant tending project, research galore, practice, and detentions.

Ugh, the detentions. Harry just barely remembered in time to set aside his work that night for later. Finally snapping out of his daze, he realized that he'd been taking notes on autopilot, and hoped that he'd gotten all the pertinent information. Else, he'd have to ask someone else, and that would certainly go over well.

The class dismissed, and everyone streamed out in their various directions. Heading for the Slytherin dorms, Harry suddenly veered

off, recognizing the twins at the doorway to headquarters. He snuck up behind them, and as all three slipped in, he tapped the twins on the shoulder, "Hey."

Whirling, the redheads yelped. "Harry!"

"Don't sneak up on us!"

"Sorry, I made a trip here earlier. Apparently, your little brother snores loud enough to get Binns' attention. So the ghost released us from class a bit early. On a whim, I checked out the books from the Restricted Section that we'd copied. The pages were replaced."

Going to the table covered with books, Fred pulled the sheaves of paper from the Alchemy texts, and opened it. "Oh, yeah. I forgot about that."

"Some of the texts in this library are protected from copying. Even if one intends to return the original, or cite the information properly, they don't allow a person to make copies by magical means. We should have expected that to happen, but we didn't." George grumbled.

"That reminds me," Harry pretended to have to dig through his thoughts to add to the suspense. "I have been asked to take on two and a half independent projects. One has to do with duplication charms. So, this all might actually help, as long as it isn't a painfully elaborate way to trick us into giving ourselves away as the pranksters everyone loves to hate."

"Wow," Fred mumbled, "You're getting bogged down."

"You're still trying out for the Slytherin's Seeker in Quidditch, right?" George asked.

"I was going to give it a shot at least." Harry nodded. "On a different topic, are you guys going to your detentions tonight?"

"When we returned to the school, McGonagall pulled us aside and told us she'd talked the Headmaster into erasing our punishment, but that it would continue as on record in the Ministry's files.

"Oh," Harry blinked, "Well, I didn't get so lucky. I have a detention tonight at the very least."

"Then we'd better get you off to the Great Hall to eat ahead of time!" Fred teased.

Rolling his eyes, Harry pulled his papers from his bag, except the ones he would need for the detention, and spread them out. "This is what I got from the books before they returned to Madam Pince in all effects."

Reading, the twins grinned, then looked at the clock. All three blinked, as they hadn't realized that the conversation had taken that long. They rushed to pack up, and scrambled through the door.

In the Great Hall, the three split up and Harry thought he saw the eyes of the professors assembled at the table flicker back and forth amongst themselves. This lent weight to his developing theory that the adults were trying to eliminate the pranks from last year. He reminded himself to try to talk the twins into turning more towards research, like they had begun the year before.

Sitting down, Harry didn't pay much attention to his surroundings, he was too busy thinking up how to work the projects into the work with the twins and class assignments. He was so lost in thought that he never noticed Zabini waving at him from the other side of the table. When he finished eating, still thinking, he stood and wandered his way to the Potions classroom, to serve his detention.

In the classroom, while he waited for the Potions Master, Harry pulled out one of the text from classes that day, and started drafting an essay. He was, in his own estimation, roughly halfway through when the door opened to usher in the adult supervising.

"Your Housemates are rather perplexed by your behavior in the Great Hall," a sliver of amusement shone through the man's voice.

"Oh," looking up, Harry put the paper, quill, and book away. He stood, and moved to the stack of cauldrons on the floor.. "Sir? Are you professors trying to do something specific with the independent studies?"

"Those are usually given to students who show a knack or interest in the field in question. Longbottom, according to Professor Sprout, is a natural in that field. Professor Flitwick is terribly impressed with your and Miss Granger's Charms work, and Professor McGonagall feels you would benefit from extra work in Transfiguration, what with what she's heard of your work with the twins."

"You're not going to give me a study too, are you?" Harry was both hoping for and against. For because he actually enjoyed working with potions. Against because he wasn't sure he could balance it with everything else.

"These detentions are serving as the independent study, Mister Potter," the smirk on the man's face told Harry all he needed to know. "Now, if you will begin? You know the routine by now, I should hope. Thus, words will not be necessary, I do have essays to grade."

The silence of the room after that was only interrupted by the occasional grumble from the professor at a particularly inept parchment, or by the low twangs and clunks of the boy dragging a cauldron around, or of two pots striking one another on accident, or Harry muttering to himself as the boy sometimes did.

"Mister Potter, I don't know if you realized this, but you are speaking to yourself about convincing the twins to work more on research and development of prank products," the words in previously silent air startled the boy. Luckily, Harry had just pulled his head out of a cauldron, so he didn't wind up with a concussion.

"Sorry sir," Harry bit his lower lip to keep quiet from that point, but found it really difficult to think about the subject without words. Finally, he blew out a breath of air in exasperation and mentally shoved that line of thought out the back door. He chanted under his breath the ingredients he thought were in the mess on his current cauldron until he got to a scrap of paper to scribble them down. He then reasoned

out which potions could have that color with those ingredients and narrowed his list down. Finally, he wrote out a guess as to what the potion had been an attempt of, and passed the rewritten process to Snape's desk.

"Finished?" Snape stood and assessed the potion, "You missed the beetle's eyes, which makes the potion completely different, or would have, had the fools not allowed the eyes to dissolve completely."

Nodding, the boy adjusted his findings and guess, and rewrote it all again. Remembering that he had a lot of questions to ask the man, Harry began with the easiest, or so he thought. "Why would McGonagall talk the Headmaster into eliminating the detentions for the others?" Harry asked.

"Does it really matter?" The answer, while typical in its delivery, was unusual because if the man didn't want to answer a question, he'd respond with 'think for yourself, Potter, you're not a Gryffindor.'

After a bit of thought, Harry wondered if he was actually supposed to answer the question, and began to think about it. He supposed that if the others' parents had stepped in, it would make a difference. Or if they were doing more work than he was, but he rather doubted that with Ron, Thomas, and Finnegan. He knew that if they had tried McGonagall and Dumbledore could have talked Professor Snape into canceling the detentions as well, but the boy would have still taken the opportunity to get extra tutoring in Potions. It wasn't remedial, certainly, but any help he could get, since this was a class heavily geared toward practical work, would be useful.

"Well?" the droll question told the boy he was supposed to answer after all, but he had no more answer than he had when he'd asked his own.

"It does matter why for some reasons, but mainly so I'd know for sure it was another example of favoritism, sir," Harry rubbed the side of his nose under his glasses a bit.

"At least in Ronald Weasley's case, the detention exception was revoked," Snape continued grading as Harry started on his next cauldron.

"I'd figured as much," Harry nodded, "Mine probably would have doubled or more if I'd gone with him."

"You'd have been lucky to not be expelled, Potter," the man snapped.

"That too," Harry shrunk in on himself, remembering that half of the redhead's punishment.

Returning to his desk, Professor Snape sat, and began grading again. After a bit, near the point when Harry finished cleaning, he spoke up, "If you're still trying to deal with the favoritism, Mister Potter, I'd warn you to give up before you're disillusioned past the breaking point. Aside from that, when you've finished cleaning the cauldron, set it with the rest, and you may leave. Return at the same time tomorrow for your usual detention task."

Nodding, the boy followed the instructions given. As he was opening the door to leave, Harry turned and called out, "I had already given up on that, sir. Now I'm just going to show them as much information as I can gather on the Muggle world, so that the Slytherins know exactly what all the fuss is about."

"You might want to abandon that task as well," Not even looking up from his grading, the man countered, "you'll have the same luck."

"I have to do something sir, or I'll wind up so jaded about it all that I'll be just like Higgs and Flint, and the other Slytherins that have given up." With that, the boy skittered out of the room. He moved so quickly, he never saw the flicker in the Potions Master's eyes.

Hurrying to the Common Room, Harry gave the password, which was still 'Seguridad', as it started out being every year, apparently, and walked through the door. He was a little surprised to see the whole Quidditch team assembled on the chairs, and attempted to sneak past. He didn't want to interrupt their planning, though it was odd in his eyes that it would take place in the Common Room, of all places.

"Ah, Potter, just the boy we've been waiting to see," Bletchley called out, causing the younger boy to freeze in place.

"Yes?" Harry looked up, not quite meeting the eyes of anyone.

"We've got the Pitch reserved for next week," Flint stood from his chair and pulled a stack of papers from the table in front of him as he walked in Harry's direction.

"So we're having tryouts on one of those days. Higgs and Pucey graduated, so we need a Seeker and a Chaser," Warrington spoke up.

"We've been canvassing the Slytherins for interest," Bole began grinning, "but we seem to have only a handful of people who are even thinking about it. Malfoy's going to try for Seeker, Zabini's thinking about trying for Chaser, and we've got a couple of third years, and a fourth year also trying for Chaser."

"So, unless you want to guarantee Malfoy's spot on the team," Derrick smirked as he left his statement in the air.

"What time next week?" Harry reached out and took the papers Flint offered, and read them. After a glance, he recognized the papers he'd given them the day before. He put them into his pouch as he waited.

"Well, we were thinking of having it during the time between the last class of the day and Supper. We couldn't have it earlier because you'll be in classes, and so will everyone else. We can't have it later because of your month of detentions."

With a sheepish grin, Harry nodded, "Sure then. I'll at least try out."

The group as a whole moved to the stairs down to the rooms, and Harry put his belongings away in his trunk, sealing it with the Muggle lock he'd picked up over the break. He then changed, closed his curtains and went to sleep.

Harry's got more plans than he has time for at this point, and yes, some will fall through. Additionally, I chose to italicize the writings of adults and leave Neville's writing plain because that emphasizes the thought put into it. Or at least, that's what I want to convey.

Somebody catch me if I use Pucey's name in any of these chapters, outside of indicating he graduated. I'll fix it somehow. And as for whether it's the right year or not, oops. I looked up the HP Lexicon, but sorry, I don't have it memorized. I did though, get enough information to say that Seelie actually could fit into the Potterverse after all.

Also, I looked up Veela on Wikipedia, and it seemed to point at the species as being female only. If Rowling's use of them includes males, tell me, and I'll find SOME way to correct it.

I write to get the plot bunny out of my head. I post to get other's ideas of what is good, and what needs fixing. I'm out to enjoy myself, while I improve my writing, and as long as what you see me doing wrong is something I can fix, I will most certainly try.

Review this Story/Chapter

For his second day of classes, Harry wasn't exactly eager to wake up and go. That was due in part to the fact that his first class of the day was Double Defense. Last year, this prospect was bad enough, Harry acknowledged, though he couldn't quite remember why. This year though, with the person in charge being who he was, Harry was quite dreading it. The interaction he'd had with the man thus far left him feeling worried that he'd wind up at the front being the test dummy for whatever spells the class was learning, simply because Lockhart thought he wanted the attention.

So it was with dragging feet that Harry got up, dressed and ventured down to the Great Hall for breakfast. In passing, to Malfoy, he muttered, "If you want my place in this class, you're welcome to it."

The snickering from the older students told the brunet he'd spoken a little louder than he had intended. After a bit, he shrugged, and sat at his new place in the lineup, and slowly ate his buttered toast, cereal, and enjoyed his glass -or three- of milk, for every drop he could.

Finally, when he could stall no more Harry stood with the rest of his class, and headed for the defense room. When he got there, he was disheartened just by the changes. The year before, foggy as it was, the walls and pillars had been draped with garlic cloves, and there had been a constant aroma of the plant. This year, the seasoning was removed, and replaced with gaudy streamers and portraits. As he looked closer, he noted that they were really just replicas of the covers of this year's texts. He muttered about not wanting to see the covers of the books any more than he had to, and plunked down in a seat. He scrunched down, hoping that would help hide him, and gingerly plucked one of the texts out of his bag.

Breezing into the room, Lockhart smiled his megawatt smile, and blathered about a quiz they would take to test their knowledge of the books. Harry wondered how the man could test them over the books when most of the students wouldn't have read them without page assignments. Okay, so most of the boys wouldn't have, unless their mothers had forced it.

Unhappily, he read the questions on the page in front of him, and could have smacked himself. He'd read the books for the tips on

dealing with the creatures, taking notes on that. The quiz however was all about Lockhart. After meeting the man once, Harry figured he should have known what kind of person the narcissist was, and should have read the books over again, taking notes on the man's life story, as told in each volume. Quickly deciding that he might as well go on novelty, the boy answered all fifty-four questions with 'blue,' which was his personal password to his trunk.

After collecting the quizzes, Lockhart tapped the stack, and then grinned. He skimmed each page, and began talking. "Such a pity. You all didn't really do any better than the rest of the students from yesterday. In fact, Miss Granger's record of a perfect score stands firmly unchallenged, though Miss Parkinson is close, having only gotten two questions wrong."

Harry could hear the muttering as the rest of his Housemates grumbled about the know-it-all, and Harry could hear a word bandied about that he really didn't like. He remembered learning it last year, and had been furious about it then. If he hadn't already had more than enough research to do as it was, he'd look into the family trees of all the students of Slytherin and see just how far back they could go before a Muggle, Muggle-born, or 'Half-blood' as the popular phrase for it, showed up in their branches.

Thus it was with shock that he heard Lockhart continue talking about the quizzes, commenting on the most original, "Though I do have to say, Mister Harry Potter, for getting every single question wrong, you have at least got persistence. You must have read all the books quite diligently to know that I never once used the word blue in any of them. Not a single time, and for that, I give ten points to Slytherin for your research, and I'll even give you full marks for originality."

Harry groaned to himself as some of the other boys tried not to laugh and failed. Harry hadn't known that Lockhart had never used the name of that hue in any of his books, but oh well. The grade part, he could deal with, but he felt odd getting full marks when he'd answered every question wrong.

"Now, to the business at hand," waving his hands about, Lockhart grinned some more, "Yesterday, I had the second years work with

Cornish Pixies, and dear me, but they had a devil of a time with them. So, to take pity on you, I will merely discuss them. First, Pixies, as you all should know by now are winged creatures. The Cornish variety are a bright blue in color, and stand at eight inches tall. Their faces are narrow, pointed, and their voices are shrill. They are easily distracted by light, sound, and things to torment. Because of their ability to fly, they can be quite difficult to contain, as yesterday's class discovered. When I released them, only Miss Granger had any real success in subduing them, and she used a Freezing Charm, as directed, of course."

Taking notes of the description provided, Harry resolved to look them up in the text from last year if he could talk it out of a third year. He was trying to find ways of making it an even exchange when he noticed that the room had fallen silent. Looking up, he noticed that all eyes were focused on him. Wincing and scrunching in his seat, Harry hoped he hadn't been muttering again as he looked in Lockhart's direction.

As he met the adult's eyes, he realized he'd been called upon for something. Blinking, Harry sat, trying to figure out what was going on. After a few seconds, Lockhart waved a hand at the small boy, motioning towards the front of the room. Mentally groaning, he walked to the front of the room, dreading what he'd been called for.

His worst fears were confirmed as he reached the desk. Lockhart reached a hand out to Harry's shoulder, and began talking again, "Now, I will show you the spell I asked Miss Granger to use to contain the pixies."

With that, he cast the Freezing Charm at the child in front of his desk, and Harry grimaced at the feeling. As he tried to work out how to break the spell on him, Harry tried not to shiver. The man jabbered and gabbed, and chattered, and the boy remained more than a little chilled during the entire lecture. His inability to move lent the boy the ability to analyze what was being said. It seemed to Harry that most of what Lockhart said was so much hot air.

A Freezing Charm would only immobilize the pixies, if you could hit them. It wouldn't blanket the whole herd, and instantly capture all of

them if you needed to. According to Lockhart, one simple chant should net a skilled spellcaster all the pixies they can see.

Finally, the class ended, and Harry was amazed to see the man blithely waving the children to leave, and not even bothering to unFreeze him. Some gathered their books and left, not even stopping for the classmate at the front of the room, and Harry wanted to roll his eyes at them. Others, like Zabini, pointed at the dark-haired child in the front of the room, and tried to get the professor's attention. Failing that, Crabbe and Goyle, stalked up to the desk, looped an arm under each of Harry's and marched the Harry-cicle through the doors, to the hallway.

Out of the classroom, Zabini, carrying Harry's things fretted about how to get the other boy to the Infirmary for Madame Pomfrey to treat him. Malfoy, tapping his foot, waved his wand at the three boys who could move, and told them, "Move you great lumps, its simple enough to fix. Finite Incantatum!"

The Ending Spell did it's work, and Harry relaxed a bit, shivering, "D'you mind a W-warming Charm? I've b-been freezing the whole class period from w-when he c-cast that."

Quickly muttering the spell, Zabini asked, "Why didn't you break out of it?"

"The Freezing Charm works by slowing down all your magic, more or less freezing it in place. If it's not accessible, you can't use it to break the Charm, now can you?" Harry piped up.

"Oh," Crabbe muttered.

After Zabini handed his bags over, Harry nodded at Malfoy, "Thanks for unfreezing me. What I don't get is why he couldn't be bothered to."

"I'm not sure the dolt remembered how," Malfoy smirked. "You owe me, Potter."

"I'll remember that for Astronomy tonight," Harry tossed over his shoulder as he headed for the Great Hall.

Harry ate, and quickly moved to stand up. Zabini caught his attention before he left the hall though. "Why did you leave the hall so quickly last night, Potter?"

"I have detention. I was given them to serve last year, and they weren't canceled." Harry shrugged.

"The Gryffindors aren't serving any," Malfoy drawled.

"I know." With that, Harry swept away from his classmates and Housemates, and gathered his supplies, and a few pages of notes. He headed for the library, where he walked up to Madame Pince's desk.

The woman looked up from her desk, and raised an eyebrow. "Yes, Mister Potter?"

"I was told that I was supposed to apologize for the duplication charm from last term." Harry wasn't sure where to take the conversation after that.

"Ah, yes," She closed the book on her desk, and pulled a quill and a sheet of paper. She wrote on it a bit, and handed the paper to Harry.

Reading it, he noted that it was a formal list of rules. At the top, was the rule 'Magical duplication of tomes is not allowed.' Sheepishly, Harry read on to the consequences. First time offenses received warnings, but each time after that resulted in suspensions from the library, or worse.

"In other words, this time you've only got the warning to deal with, and whatever punishment your Head of House dreamt up." On anyone else, that expression would have been seen as a smirk, but Harry didn't feel safe thinking Madam Pince could smirk like that.

Taking the paper and folding it into his books, Harry nodded and headed for a table not already occupied by Ravenclaws. He spread his books out a bit, and began working on essays. After a bit, he finished most of the ones assigned, and began to research the topics

set to him as independent studies. After a while, he found more information to add to his existing essays, and revised them accordingly. When he tired of working on his assignments, he tried looking up the Wizarding laws concerning custody of children, but the only law books were currently checked out. Harry got the feeling that the fifth year Ravenclaw reading them cover to cover would have a fit if he asked to borrow a few from her. She seemed a bit stressed, which the boy thought odd. Fifth year or not, it was only the second day. At the sound that indicated changing classes, Harry decided he'd worked enough on his essays and it was time to at least rest before the Astronomy class late that night.

Harry's schedule had given him a short day that day in the first place, but it was made even lighter by the presence of the Astronomy block that shifted to a nighttime spot. Strange as it was, the schedule was arranged this way, figuring the students wouldn't be able to stay up late enough to pay attention fully to the class unless they had had a chance to sleep. Keeping them up late would be unfair to the next morning's classes otherwise.

As Harry packed away the books he'd used, Granger walked into the section he was cleaning up. She spotted the books he was returning to shelves, and asked, "What are you researching?"

Moving from one bookshelf to another, as he put away books, Harry answered, "I was bored, so I was just looking things up. The twins are in classes, so I can't exactly work on any projects. I have Astronomy tonight, so I had free time. I finished my essays, and have gotten relaxed enough that I think I should go to the Slytherin part of the castle and rest until Supper and my detention."

"Detention? You had nothing to do with the car fiasco, right? So why do you have detention?" She was honestly puzzled.

"This is from last year's events. I got a month's worth then starting last night, and am serving them now." Harry finished reshelfing the books and picked up his notes.

"The others involved in that aren't serving any, so why are you?" She just had to ask the one question that still bothered Harry.

Sighing as he packed his bag up, "I don't know. If you really want to know, ask the Headmaster. You seem on good enough terms with him to possibly get an actual answer."

Without giving her time to ask another question, Harry left the library, and headed for his Common Room. He walked through the den, to the stairs, and down to the Second Year dormitory. Switching his books from those he'd been using to Astronomy's book, sextile and notes Harry closed the trunk with his password, and the bag. From there, he toed off his shoes and lay back on his mattress.

After a bit of thought, the boy removed his glasses and placed them on the end table to the right of his bed. He then drifted, thinking about the projects. With the research he'd done that day, he had a better idea of how he could implement them into the work with the twins, but it would still be a challenge. Even before adding in the time he'd have to devote to Quidditch, if he made the team. He'd have more time after the month's worth of detentions was over, but Harry wasn't sure if he could count on that time. He might find himself still working as he had last year, on potions that didn't quite work in class, in the 'remedial tutoring,' that he actually enjoyed taking advantage of. He wasn't sure quite why the man was allowing him to spend so much time in the lab when it wasn't detentions, but something told Harry that Snape had a reason that would completely floor him, should he ever find it out.

Not sure exactly how much time had passed, Harry looked out from his curtains to see the clock on the wall. It pointed to a little before 'Dinnertime,' and the boy decided it was soon enough to head to the Great Hall. Setting his feet on the floor, Harry reached over for his glasses, and then walked to the other side of the bed, where he'd taken off his shoes. Replacing them on his feet, Harry walked from the dorm, taking his bag of Astronomy study supplies along, and into the Common Room.

The older students in the Common Room looked up, and Harry remembered his earlier intent to borrow or trade a third year for their Defense text from the year before. Making sure to start the conversation with a male third year, Harry discussed the trade. The

boy turned out to be one of the Chaser hopefuls, and Harry and Montague hit it off, enough to make the trade anyway. One Second Year Defense text in exchange for the notes Harry had taken from the otherwise useless Lockhart books.

A cluster of students stood and headed for the Great Hall, and Harry trekked along with them. Reaching the table, he veered off from the general mass, and plunked himself down where he liked to sit. Momentarily, Malfoy and a handful of other Second Years walked through the huge doors, and Harry tried not to chuckle at the almost pout on the blonde's face. Remembering the copy of Lockhart book notes he'd promised Montague, Harry quickly suggested to Malfoy that 'to pay for the Ending Spell earlier, here's a copy of the pertinent facts from Lockhart's books,' and smirked to himself when the blonde actually took them.

Having forced himself away from carrying out the family tree research, Harry tried not to grumble about the Pureblood drivel he was hearing at the table but something must have shown on his face all the same.

"Pity you can't claim more than Half-blood status, huh, Potter?" Malfoy sneered.

"How many second cousins are you sitting at the same table as, Malfoy?" Harry returned.

"What?" Malfoy backtracked, "How does your being a Half-blood have anything to do with my being related to anyone at this table?"

"If being Pureblood is so important that no Pureblood wants to marry even Half-bloods, then your families have to marry into each others' names rather heavily, don't they?" Harry had finished eating, and was now just toying with his silverware out of boredom.

"It keeps the filth out, though, doesn't it?" Flint hissed.

"I just thought it was rather similar to the concept that Muggle European royalty lived by for ages and ages," Harry shrugged, "And they took it to such a level that they discovered that certain traits and diseases resulted when first cousins married."

"There's a point in there somewhere, I'm sure," Bletchley speared a potato wedge with his fork as he prodded the conversation along.

"Then they realized that those traits and diseases resulted when lower class citizens married and had children with their own close relatives too often too. They're not exclusive causes of these things, but they do cause it. Is there some kind of prevention for this in the Magical world?"

Harry stood up at the table's silence, taking it as his cue to leave. Gathering his bag, he paused, "I don't necessarily care about the filth in my veins, but at least I'm not going to be running across all my cousins in one place. If nothing else, look into that question, and give me the answer. I'd really like to know. Because otherwise, the Pureblood stuff doesn't make any more sense to me than my crusade from last year made to any of you."

Leaving the Great Hall, Harry resolved to look into the Pureblood family trees that he could access after all, and added to that the directive of investigating if the Wizarding World had a preventative for inbreeding defects. He'd find a way to suss out the information, even if it meant he got no sleep.

Reaching the Potions lab, Harry set his bag on the floor, near the door. He walked to the front of the room, where a note rested. Reading it, Harry realized he'd been set to a different task for the night. He reread the instructions in the note, and the ingredients listed, the boy began the Potion it indicated. He supposed that some would find it odd for him to be brewing a Fourth Year potion, but he'd worked with the twins last year, and most of the Second Year potions were just variations of the First Year ones. Third year was further variants and it wasn't until the last year before OWLs that students saw a slew of new potions introduced.

That reminded the boy of the twins' need to study. He wondered if they remembered what next year was to them, and if he'd need to get on their cases like he'd done last year. That reminded him of the question he'd meant to ask while in the Burrow, and he tried to think of a time where he could ask them about it. He was so lost in thought

and so involved with the potion that he didn't hear the Potions Master open the door and walk in. Luckily, Snape recognized the student's absorption in the potion, and didn't make any sudden noises to startle the boy.

During a pause in the potion, Harry looked up and noted the professor grading papers. "Sir, I looked at the notes the twins and I got about Alchemy last year, and was wondering if there was a way to get more information."

"I rather doubt you could manage four independent studies, your work with the twins, a possible inter-house study group and Quidditch, Mister Potter, so I suggest you wait until you actually are a Fourth Year before broaching this subject again." Professor Snape responded without even looking up from the essays in front of him.

Nodding to himself, Harry continued with his potion. The reminder of the study group had Harry boggling internally. He'd forgotten all about it during the course of the day. He'd been having a hard enough time planning for the three projects, Quidditch, and work with the twins, he really wasn't sure how the study group would work into that as well, unless it wove in with the rest to make all of them easier.

As he finished the first stage of the Burn Relief he'd been set to, Harry turned the heat off, to let it cool. When it reached its coolest temperature, it should be an opaque white, and the grey tone to it presently suggested that the boy might have actually gotten it right. A sudden question he'd meant to ask the night before popped into his head, and Harry had to voice it, "Sir, is there anything that can be done about my housing situation this year? I remember you saying nothing could be done because I'd waited too long."

"I placed a formal statement concerning it in June, Potter. Now it's in the Ministry, waiting for investigation." Snape didn't look up from his work. "What happened this summer?"

"You heard I stayed with the Weasleys towards the end, right?" Harry began.

"Dumbledore told Mrs. Weasley she could take you for the last two days of the summer, to get your supplies." Snape raised an eyebrow, finally focused on the boy.

"The twins dragged Ron with them in that car to pick me up," Harry smiled as he looked back down to the potion.

"They got impatient, did they?" Snape's voice held a bit of laughter in it.

"I suppose so, but really it was a good thing. If they hadn't come to fetch me, I don't know what would have happened." Harry shuddered.

"What do you mean, Potter?" the mild laughter in the man's voice was quickly replaced by ice. "Your relatives, what did they do?"

"Do you remember me telling you about the House Elf?" At the man's nod, Harry continued, "It cast a Hover Charm, and I got the blame. My relatives then locked me up in the room they let me sleep in, with bars on the windows, and I don't know how many locks on the door. They put in a special flap to push through food three times a day."

"Who all have you told this to?" Snape hissed.

Fidgeting, Harry wondered if he was about to be called a liar. It had been done before when he'd once tried to explain his living in a cupboard under the stairs in elementary school. "The twins know, Ron knows, I know, and now you. Other than that, I haven't told anyone. Ron and the twins might have told Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, but they made sure to do it when I wasn't around."

"How often does this sort of thing happen, Potter?" Snape's eyes were more calculating than usual, and the boy was really getting worried.

"What kind of thing?" Harry was arguing with himself about mentioning the cupboard or not, and suddenly, the man's eyes went from cold to black ice. Shuddering visibly now, Harry dropped his gaze back to the potion.

"How often did you get locked up with meager food and water?" Snape hissed again.

Biting his lip, Harry started to count, as he stirred the potion. His muttering was low enough to frustrate the adult, who stalked up to the desk and hissed again, "Potter!"

"I don't know, sir. I stopped counting when I was five," Harry felt the best way to guarantee he wouldn't go back was to tell it all. "I lived under the stairs until I got my letter to Hogwarts sir."

A low noise caused the child to peer up. As he saw the Potions Master's face, Harry hoped that it wasn't directed at him. He didn't want to think about death threats this young. Really, he didn't want to think about them at all, but when you have no choice, what can you do?

"I will look into this information as well, Mister Potter," Snape visibly fought to control himself, then spoke again, "Up until now, I had wondered why exactly you were in Slytherin over Ravenclaw. I wonder no longer. Professor Flitwick is capable of dealing with such situations, do not get me wrong, but there is a great deal about your housemates that you do not yet know. If you should share this with any of them, I would suggest the older ones be left out. This will not help your cause from last year."

"I'm sorry sir." Harry stuttered, "But I told you last night, that I don't much care about that anymore. I already know how much good it does. The best I can hope for is that if they're going to hate Muggles, at least the people they hate will have faces."

If Harry had been looking up, he'd have seen the wince those words caused. Relaxing from his tense stance, the professor asked, "Are you in need of healing potions, Potter?"

"No, sir, why?" Harry had a vague idea of what he was being asked, but wasn't completely certain.

"Never mind, child," Snape shook his head, and wandered back to his desk. He sat, with a flump that Harry associated with exhaustion, and

tit left the boy wondering if he should have kept his news to himself for a bit longer.

After a few minutes of silence, the scratching of Snape grading resumed, and Harry noted that the potion was nearing readiness for the next stage, leading to its completion. He turned the heat back up and mixed in the last ingredients. With the last few seconds of the stewing, Harry added the final ingredient, and was happy to see the signal of a properly made Burn Ointment. The creamy texture was tactilely inviting, and if Harry hadn't known that it was too soon, he'd have dipped in a finger to test. Of course, that would have netted him a burn worse than those the Ointment could cure. Thinking in that path, Harry chanced another question, "Sir, do you send student brewed potions, creams, balms and such to the Infirmary?"

"If they're done well enough, I see no reason for them to go to waste," Snape smirked, "Not to mention it saves me time in having to fill the requests when Madam Pomfrey makes them. If I have students work on them, the requests come at a slower pace. Currently, I have NEWT level students using their 'free periods' to brew, and the results often are turned in, to supplement what I brew. There are even cases of students not having resistances to potions, and thus needing weaker versions, so sometimes even those potions find uses in the Infirmary."

"Oh," in a small voice, the boy tried to digest this information.

"The potions considered student level are only a fraction of those used in the infirmary, and sadly, seem on the list of most frequent needed. So many fools try to brew unsupervised, and thus turn up with bruises, burns, and scrapes from their attempts. It's only fitting in my mind that the more successful students should supply the curatives in these situations." The Potions Master added.

"Oh," Harry felt silly repeating himself, but had nothing more verbose to say.

"You've accomplished the goal of your detention, and it's nearing time for Astronomy, so you'd best be going," the man waved Harry out of the room, after the supplies and cauldron were cleaned and replaced.

Reaching the tower where class was to be held, Harry found a likely seat and plunked himself down on the stone. He then shook his head at himself, for he'd been distracted from his questions to ask the Potions Master again. After a bit, the rest of the class filtered in, and the Professor called them to order. She started them off by pointing at the North Star.

"Currently, the North Star is Polaris. In a few thousand years that will change, but by that time we'll all be long gone, long lived as we may be. Nautical engineers have used this star as their guide for ages and eons." Pointing to a small configuration that made a ladle shape, she related the various names of the cluster.

Jotting down notes about the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper and the names they had across the globe, Harry wondered if they would have to remember them all, and match them with their respective origins. He wasn't sure how to keep Ursa Major and Minor separate from the Troughs, and he wondered abstractedly why they were waiting until second year to begin the stargazing.

Last year Astronomy had mostly been the explanation of the names of the planets, their Roman and Greek names, and the stories behind the deities those names represented. The professor had joked once or twice about how they should know by now that Earth had the least original name of all the orbs in their solar system, but in case they didn't she'd be happy to tell them again.

Ending the class, the Astronomy Professor assigned them an essay about the various names of the two constellations, their location in the sky, and simple sketches of the star clusters that made up each group. Harry followed the rest of the class down the stairs, and was slightly perplexed when Longbottom sidled up to him from a side hallway.

"Curfew isn't for another fifteen minutes, and we should probably check on the Mandrakes," the heavier boy said.

Nodding distractedly, Harry followed. Upon reaching the Greenhouse, Harry fidgeted a bit, "How are we looking in on them?"

"We're just looking at the soil, making sure they haven't displaced it or anything, putting a little feed down to let it soak through." Longbottom reassured him.

A simple enough task, but the sheer number of plants made it easy for Harry to understand why the other boy would want help. Even so, by the time they finished, they would still stand a chance of getting caught out after curfew, and both boys dashed to their respective Common Rooms.

Slipping through the door of his own, Harry sighed in relief. Quietly of course. There was enough attention on the door with him having come through at all, but he wasn't in a mood to draw more with a heavy sigh.

Lugging his bag behind him, Harry felt tired enough, nap earlier notwithstanding, to go straight to bed, and so he did. He felt that tomorrow was soon enough to deal with whatever essays he hadn't already done, and that sleep was more important than reworking his assignments for the third time in most cases.

We all know how that Defense class with the Gryffindors really went, but we'll let Lockhart have his illusion for now, right? Speaking of the Freezing Charm, I don't know much about it past Hermione actually casting it at the Pixies, at least in the movie, so it's entirely possible I pulled the description of it out of thin air. Instead of calling me on it, and getting mad, feel free to laugh, point and educate me on the fact.

I'm no political whiz, but this is my slant on the Pureblood outlook. Or at least, why I don't like it. Feel free to provide info to corroborate or further educate me. Though I warn you that I will have occasional comments in regards to it, I doubt Harry's going to do much. At least, not at this point, he already has more than enough classwork to keep him occupied.

I don't presume to know all the varied names of the constellations that the North Star is a part of. The only ones I know are the Dippers, the Bears, and I think there's a pair of troughs. Further, I am not entirely sure Astronomy is even a class offered before third year, but

since I'm tweaking things already, I'll just play this card too. But, I really do need to know, who teaches it?

Not sure how he'd done it, Harry managed to balance the research of the prank shop, the research for Transfigurations and Charms, late night trips to check on the Mandrakes, and his detentions during his first week back. So, when Flint reminded Harry to stop by the pitch the next day for the tryouts, Harry blinked, and vaguely wondered if he could talk Granger into showing him how she did her color-coded scheduling.

The day of Quidditch tryouts dawned, not bright and sunny or even dark and dreary, but windy and rather cool. Bundling up, the boy prepared for his morning class, Double Potions with the Gryffindors, and headed down to the Great Hall in a state of complete distraction. This fugue was so comprehensive he didn't pay any heed to the fact that he'd more or less stolen a Seventh Year's seat to avoid the still ongoing argument with Malfoy. Luckily, this Seventh Year was a late riser, and Harry was done eating and walking out of the Hall by the time the older Slytherin walked in the doors. Thus, had he been less scattered, Harry would have heard the mirth-filled retort as he passed, "Thanks for warming my seat for me, Potter."

Realizing he'd be paired with Longbottom like in the first week of classes, Harry sat towards the middle of the room, and pulled his book from his bag. He wanted to start copying the instructions so that Longbottom would have a better chance of reading them, but didn't know which potion the class would be working on. The real drawback Harry experienced from working with a partner was that he was actually limited to the potions Second Years made. They were sometimes so simple it was hard to brew them without making additions that would set other students into a panic. Of course, doing that even on his own disconcerted classmates. Well, okay, so it frightened the Gryffindors.

At that thought, Harry chuckled lowly to himself, and peered around so that he could be sure no one had heard. He scribbled notes in the margins of the book as he read along, and hoped that the other students would hurry up and arrive. Admittedly, he was partially anxious for the sake of the potion, and partly because he wanted the whole day over with, the tryouts done, and to be able to move on with his life. Fidgeting in his seat, the boy became distracted again with thoughts of how badly the tryouts could go, either with him fumbling

horribly at catching the Snitch, or doing so well he was assured the position. Frankly, the poor boy still couldn't make up his mind whether or not he wanted to be Slytherin's Seeker.

Finally, the rest of the class meandered into the room, Slytherins first. The House of Snakes claimed the far side of the room, with better ventilation, better lighting, and better surveillance capabilities. Though it did rather trap them in, they felt it an even trade. Gryffindors however, weren't exactly fighting for the seats on that side of the room. After all, sitting where they did gave them better escape options. Having asked once how the seating arranged with the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws, Harry knew that the other two Houses also split the room evenly in half, just that the split was center of the room forward or back rather than center to left or right.

When the last student slipped in, just barely before the class was to start, most everyone relaxed. Longbottom never relaxed anywhere outside the Greenhouses, and Ron, Thomas, and Finnegan were always guilty of something in the classroom, so they never relaxed when Snape might be around. Speaking of whom, the Professor strode into the classroom smoothly, not saying a word. For a moment, the class thought it unusual, but most found themselves rather grateful for it. After all, they usually had fared better on grades when he arrived quietly. If he spewed vitriol from the opening of the doors, that was a sure sign that most of the class wouldn't like their grades.

Catching on just in time, Harry quickly stopped reading the book and looked up at the front of the classroom, just as Snape reached his desk. Standing before the class, the man began the class. "Your summer essays have been marked and recorded. At the end of class, you may retrieve them, unless you already know you have failed and do not want physical proof of such for your parents to scorn and your siblings to mock. If that is the case, take them anyway, such drivel will only clutter my office."

Stepping away from his desk, the Potions Master jabbed his wand at the board behind him, upon which appeared the instructions to a potion, "You will be brewing this cousin to the Calming Drought in partners. Those of you that remember your assigned pairings from

last term, get moving. Those that don't, either ask a neighbor or work with the process of elimination."

As Harry had sat towards the median of the room, and Longbottom always did so, the two boys had hardly any moving at all to do, and were able to begin discussion of the potion almost immediately. Harry quickly copied the down instructions to make the other boy's reading easier. While Longbottom read, Harry collected the ingredients.

Upon returning to the table, Harry noticed that the cauldron had been set up, a fire started, and Longbottom was frowning at the sheet of paper. Setting the collection in his arms on the table, the brunet asked, "What's wrong, Longbottom?"

"I, uh, read the book two or three times over the break, just, just so I wouldn't be so bad this year, and I thought I'd gotten to the point that I understood this class. Reading this," Longbottom pointed rather despondently at the paper in front of him, "flips that thought right, uh, right over onto the ground, head first."

Thankfully, the other boy's stuttering had eased up, and now Harry only had to deal with the pauses in speech. Easily done much more so, at least, than the stutter. Thinking about stuttering made something in the back of his mind hiccup. Rather than pondering it, as they were supposed to be working on the potion, Harry shoved it to the back burner that things that could wait always got.

"What's the part you don't understand?" Harry handed the newt liver to the other boy to slice thinly.

"I got to where we were supposed to wait for the potion to turn rose-colored, and I understand what it means by 'stir clockwise thrice,' but how are we supposed to fold in the ground pixie wings?" Longbottom's expression almost made Harry laugh, but he bit it back on account of the worry oozing out of his pores.

"The only way I can explain that is to liken it to a cooking process," Harry muttered.

"Okay?" Longbottom nodded, "So?"

Biting his lip, Harry answered, "Well, as far as I can figure, it means that the potion will be fairly thick. When cooking, when you fold in an ingredient, you put it into the center of, say, bread dough, and fold the dough in half, then half again and again, until the new ingredient is blended. In this case, since we're not actually touching the potion, I'd suppose that's what the spatulas are for."

By that point, the fluid in the pot was warm enough to start adding ingredients, and so Harry began. He'd hand items to the other boy to chop, slice, dice, or grind, and spent his time focusing on adding the ingredients as the directions called for them. He'd asked Longbottom the term before if this was an acceptable mode of operation, and the shy boy had nodded, saying 'anything that gets fewer explosions in this class is okay by me.' It worked to a point. There were still explosions, as sometimes, Longbottom would dice something that should have just been sliced, or would miss large kernels in his grinding. The important part was that there were fewer of them, and for that, most of the rest of the class was willing to thank the dark-haired boy verbally at the end of each bomb-free period.

The majority of the class was nearing the last stages of the potion when Harry heard muttering coming from the Malfoy and Weasley pairing. Normally, the grumbles came sooner, as neither boy had any consideration for the other, and would butt heads right off. Malfoy had tried to set up a similar operation as Harry did with Longbottom. The difference was, while Harry asked first, Malfoy foisted the items on the redhead and said short fuse always read the reasoning as the blonde being too lazy to do his own work. Thus, while their potions didn't explode, the two rarely got full marks when working together.

The grumbling got louder, and Harry began to hear specific remarks and insults. He froze when he heard the redhead mutter 'Death Eater,' and winced when the return insult included 'pay attention to Granger', 'pity,' 'Mudblood,' and 'surpassing a Pureblood.' Waiting for the indignation of the bushy-haired girl, he was more than a little surprised to hear silence. After a second of confusion, Harry returned his attention to the potion. It looked like today would be explosion free, though the Confounding Poultice would possibly be a little too good at its job.

He'd read that the Poultice was used on hysterical individuals, and sometimes, in rare cases, on those suspected of being under the Imperius Curse. It caused a minor amount of confusion, which calmed the histrionics, and made things more difficult for the controlling witch or wizard. As it stood, Harry and Longbottom's Poultice might be as strong as a Cunfundus Charm, but the boy wasn't sure, as that was one he hadn't cast yet.

Finally, the Poultice was ready, and Harry poured the concoction into the bowl provided, then sealed it up. He was used to odd looks when he used his homemade potholders to do these things, but figured if it got the job done well, and quickly, what was a few looks thrown in?

Handing the bowl to Longbottom to set on Professor Snape's desk, Harry began cleaning the cauldron. He'd felt safe in having the Gryffindor turn in their version of the assignment as the Potions Master was currently standing in front of Granger and Parkinson's bench, reluctantly complimenting the duo on their potion. Both girls were hard workers, and more than a little bit of perfectionists, but their antipathy towards one another often resulted in less than perfect potions. It seemed like this was a good day for them.

After Longbottom returned, Harry caught the argument between Ron and Malfoy once again. There was quite a bit being said in those grumbles and snarls that Harry was amazed at. He wondered just how many generations back the fight went, then shuddered as Ron started getting louder. Longbottom jolted in his seat, turned to the redhead and tried to shush him. Not having any of that, Ron just got a smidge louder.

"Five points from Gryffindor for classroom disruption, Mister Weasley," Professor Snape drawled.

Sputtering, the redhead sank back into his seat, doing his best not to speak another word. Malfoy smirked, and then peered at their assignment. His face crumpled into a grimace, and the blonde reached to the bowl on their desk and began trying to put the Poultice in it. What little Harry saw of it, told him that the other boys' wasn't

going to be able to produce enough confusion, it was too milky in color, instead of looking mother-of-pearlish.

Shortly after, the class was dismissed, and almost universally converged upon the Great Hall. After a brief thought that as children, their stomachs ruled their minds and actions, Harry shrugged and looked toward the Gryffindor table. Spotting the twins, next to their friend Lee Jordan, he caught their attention and pointed towards the kitchens. A nod from the twins told him to hurry up and eat. As he continued eating, Harry spotted the littlest Weasley reading a book. He hadn't known her long enough to be sure, so he didn't think much of it, other than she must be trying hard to get better grades than her brother Ron.

Finishing his lunch, Harry left the Great Hall. He'd made basic conversation efforts with the rest of his House, and had finally caught on to their noticing his distraction for the last week and change. He'd tried to explain it as having a lot of work to do that he wasn't sure how to fit into his schedule, but they didn't seem to believe it. They seemed to like the idea of being worried about tryouts better.

Harry stood near the door leading to the kitchens and heard the twins arriving. He was a little surprised to see them walking along with their other friend. Harry had never met the boy, content to leave the twins their own friends. Besides, what he'd heard out of that particular Gryffindor's mouth concerning Slytherins didn't lend to the idea of he and Jordan becoming best buddies.

The entire concept was shot down in flames the instant the older boy spotted the brunet. "Fred, George, tell me this isn't what you wanted me to see. A Slytherin? You can't be friends with that, can you?"

More than a little offended at having his nominative pronoun being neuter, Harry glared, but kept silent. He wasn't going to give the other boy a chance to feel vindicated by a response. Glaring, though, was well within his options.

"Say, Lee, maybe you can tell me," Fred's voice was mild, but Harry was hoping he heard a hint of anger.

"Why it's so bad when Slytherins do that," George's arms were crossed as he and his brother ping-ponged their speech.

"But you obviously have no problems calling a Slytherin an 'it' in front of him." Fred finished.

"B-but they're all Dark!" the third Gryffindor whined.

"And?" George smirked suddenly, "Is Dark Chocolate evil all of a sudden?"

Harry tried not to break out laughing, he'd never thought of it that way.

"What does food have to do with it?" Jordan asked.

"Well, you said he was Dark," George was still grinning, "And so's that particular type of chocolate. I just wondered if someone being Dark making them automatically evil held true for chocolate?"

"Why does it matter?" Jordan grumbled.

"Because if being Dark doesn't guarantee something's evil," Fred chuckled at his friend, "Why should it be that way for a person?"

Harry meanwhile was trying not to die laughing. He'd never, ever, even once in his explanations with Granger, Ron, Longbottom, or even the other Slytherins thought of likening the Dark as evil concept with food. It was priceless.

Sputtering, Jordan turned and started walking away. After a bit, he stopped, and met Harry's eyes, "I know you helped them prank Ron, Percy and Malfoy. I'm still trying to figure out why. But first, I'm going to try and make sense of what they just said. When I do that, I'll get back to you."

As soon as the fourth boy was out of hearing, the 'triplets' broke down laughing. During a pause, one of the twins spoke the password, and they slipped into their headquarters, still giggling a mile a minute. When they finally calmed down, they sat in their favored chairs, and caught their breath.

"So, what did you need to talk about?" Fred wiped his eyes theatrically.

Grimacing, Harry started lining out his idea for what they would do concerning the pranks, "I've been thinking that we should stop the pranking people to open their eyes. It's not working. Instead, we could just research this stuff and put it together. Or something."

"Aw, that's no fun," George whined.

"Well," Fred hesitated, "I suppose, if we did the research, when we get to putting things together, instead of pranks on people for that reason, we could pull pranks to test our materials."

"Or we could ask people to volunteer to test them," Harry countered.

George seemed to warm up to the idea, "What if we got people to test them for us, in return for giving them a small supply of the finished product, to use for their own pranks?"

"We'd have to find a way to keep it from being traced back to us," Harry warned.

"We've only got three more years," Fred mumbled and stood up to pace.

"It might work if we focus on pranks that are self-directed to start," George pointed, "You know, like ones that would be 'get out of class' types of pranks."

"If we dreamed up a series of candies one could eat just before or even during class that would let them skive off," Fred stopped pacing and reached for paper.

"If they're self-directed, and honestly look like the person just got ill," Harry pondered, "they might not trace back to us immediately. And if we can get a measure of loyalty from our customers, they'll make the delay even longer. This might actually work."

"It shouldn't be too much of a challenge to make candies that make people sick," George grinned.

"We could even counter that by making them two part deals." Fred was jumping with excitement now, "One part to fake sick, and get out of class, and then the other to cure them, so that they can actually enjoy the free time, not having to actually go to the Infirmary. Pomfrey would just treat them and send them back to class anyway."

"Wicked!" Harry was just as eager to get started as the twins.

"Should we let Neville or Hermione in on it?" Fred asked.

The silence that suggestion was met with was contemplative, rather than outright rejection. Harry was leery of Granger's inclusion again, considering what he could remember of the end of the year before. Longbottom, however, he could only see being included for his trove of knowledge in Herbology. After a bit, Harry responded, "As far as Granger is concerned, something tells me that I should be angry with her from last year, but I can't quite remember it. And in Longbottom's case, I don't see the point in bringing him in, when his only real expertise is Herbology. Sure we can consult him, but I wouldn't tell him too much."

"You don't remember the end of last year?" Fred was horrified.

"Not exactly. I remember realizing the Headmaster was gone, that someone was after something important, and that we were caught by the Professors on our way there. I also remember something at the Leaving Feast made me mad, but I can't remember what it was." Harry listed off the facts in his memory.

"That means you might have been Obliviated or Confounded," George gasped.

"I don't know for sure if it's a case of Obliviation, as it might be a Memory Charm," Harry sighed, "I've been thinking on it since returning to the Magic world, but can't come up with a reason or an answer to the gaps missing."

Hesitantly, Fred suggested, "I don't think that's really very much a good thing."

"It might, in fact, be quite a bad one," George finished the thought.

"Well, sadly, class is starting in ten minutes, so we have to scatter, or I'd stay and chat with you two about it." Harry began gathering his supplies for Transfiguration, the twins not far behind.

He was not very fond of the class, to be truthful. Accomplishments from one half of the class would be praised and lauded, while the successes of the other half were met with tight smiles and chagrin. This year, though, Harry began to feel a change. Professor McGonagall seemed to have warmed up, at least to Harry, that is. The brunet boy could only hope that the change stemmed from events of the year before, or from Malfoy's self-directed feud with Harry. Otherwise, he had no clue as to their origin

As the last student took their seat, McGonagall informed the class that those who hadn't succeeded in their task last class would be working on the same project, for fewer points, and those who had, were to modify as many details as possible. Briefly Harry wondered if anyone other than the Muggleborns in the class would recognize the pencil he wanted to Transfigure.

Grinning to himself, he gave it a shot. Starting with the wooden pencil, he changed the solid stick of lead to several thinner ones. He thinned the wood casing, turning the remnants into small springs. He didn't know what to call it, but he even made the plastic part that the lead was pushed through. Then he turned the eraser into a small white one, set into the top, and turned the top into a plunger. He took a break and looked closely. It seemed to him that he just had a wooden version of mechanical pencils, but when he changed it to plastic, he'd test to see if it was successful.

Looking briefly around, he was glad to see that no one was watching him work. With a tiny grin, he set back to work on his creation. He turned the wood into plastic, and then picked it up. He heard the clicks and clunks that spoke of the lead moving around, and pushed the top of the pencil down a few times. After a bit, he was pleased to

see a bit of lead shoved out. Grinning to himself, Harry decided to thank Dudley later for throwing so many of those at him, broken of course.

"Mister Potter, may I ask what that is?" the Professor's voice over his shoulder so suddenly made the boy yip and jump. He looked at her, and gulped.

"It's a variety of pencil. Sometimes they make plastic pencils with small bits of lead in them that you can push out by pushing down on the top," He showed her with the pencil quickly, "it saves time having to sharpen."

"Will it actually write?" She seemed to have a hard time believing this. Granger and Thomas grinned.

Putting the tip of lead to paper, he wrote, 'They write just like wooden pencils do, only with finer lines.' Chuckling at his cheekiness, the Transfiguration professor patted him lightly on the shoulder, "Five points to Slytherin for innovation."

As she moved on, Harry gaped mentally, trying with everything he had not to do so physically as well. She not only gave points, but she hadn't seemed reluctant to do so either. As he looked around, his eye caught Granger's, and he thought he could see her wanting to speak to him. Sighing he nodded, he'd talk to her as class let out.

Finally, Harry got so bored in class, he started actively watching the others working on their project. Zabini, next to him, could get the wood, and the lead, but couldn't seem to make an eraser. Wondering if it would help, Harry dug into his bag, where he kept his chunky erasers. Pulling it out, he dropped it onto the other boy's desk. It was pink, painfully so, and rectangular. The noise caused Zabini to look over in surprise.

"What is that?" it almost sounded like the other boy was afraid of it.

"That's an eraser. No pencil attached obviously." Harry grinned, "I saw the trouble you were having with that part, so I thought maybe seeing one on its own would help."

Picking it up gingerly, Zabini peered closely at it. He turned it to look at all sides, and then handed it back, with a determined look on his face. As Harry put the pink mess in his bag, Zabini waved his wand at the still squared part of the pencil, and cast the charm again. Finally, the eraser with its metal holder topped the block of wood and lead.

With that, Harry recognized how few in the class hadn't accomplished the task, and set out to return his mechanical pencil to a toothpick. It was actually harder than he'd thought it would be. He wondered if it was because he'd taken each piece into individual consideration. Grumbling a little to himself, Harry focused on turning the innards of the pencil back into wood. He'd gotten it back into a normal pencil when Professor McGonagall stood at the front of the class.

"All of you have now turned your needles into pencils, and some of you have made interesting creations from that idea. I believe it is time to move on to something a bit more difficult." She held a tiny thing by the tips of her fingertips, and waved her wand at it. She now had two tiny things that shone, held by her fingertips.

"You will return your pencils to their natural state, that of a toothpick, and will now make that single toothpick into two or more sewing needles." She waved her wand again, and the needles became one toothpick again, "and back. Those of you that accomplish this task in the time remaining will get extra points. If you can't, don't worry, I won't subtract points from your grade this time, as we have so little time left in class. Just know that if you can't after the next class either, you will lose points then."

Harry quickly turned his pencil back into a toothpick, and then concentrated on turning it into two small slivers of metal. After the fact, he supposed that having done what he had to make a mechanical pencil, this could have been called easy. All the same, he was more than a little surprised to see the two needles on his desk. He usually needed a second try at this point in the class.

"Ah, two more points to Slytherin, Mister Potter, you've accomplished this remarkably well," Harry didn't know whether he was more shocked by the praise, the points, or the fact that she had just picked

them up and smiled at the eyeholes in the needles. "I think you may prove just as capable in Transfiguration as your father was."

A warm fuzzy feeling near the center of his chest made Harry wonder what was going on. He'd never felt that before, and everyone knew that McGonagall had a soft spot for Gryffindors. Yet, here she was, acting like he was one of her brood.

With a small smile, she set the needles back on his desk, and waved at them, "Now return them, Mister Potter, and I will give you leave to work on a writing assignment for what little time is left."

Feeling rather like a fish out of water, Harry rather shakily set to the task. He was relieved when he had a single toothpick on his desk after the third try. Surely she'd be disappointed with that.

Apparently not, she just smiled indulgently and explained, "After your precise Transfiguring of a wooden pencil to that plastic one, you are likely to have slightly strained yourself, in the magical sense. It's only to be expected that you would have a more difficult time now that you've done yet more transfiguring. With practice, both lines of work done today will be simple, and you'll be working on things like turning pigs into horses, or some such nonsense outside of class."

She turned on her heel and continued walking through the classroom. Harry, for his part, was rather glad not to have another magic-using class after this. He could only hope History that day wouldn't be too difficult to stay awake in. He pulled out his notes for the independent study and began to write. He was working on a second draft, but felt as though there was a lot of information missing. If he'd dared after today, he'd have asked the woman whether or not she had any books in her personal collection he could borrow.

Class dismissed, and Harry put his belongings in his bag, left the room, and headed for History. Then he remembered he was supposed to talk to Granger, and slowed down. The girl was waiting around the corner for him, and as soon as he stopped, she began talking, knowing they had a short amount of time.

"I've noticed you spending a great deal of time in the library. Is there any research I can help you with?" She seemed eager to help, but Harry had to disappoint her.

"Sorry, I'm working on a lot of independent studies, so not really. I'm supposed to do the research myself, and in the case of my work with the twins, we are just starting a plan right now, and haven't even gotten as far as the research stage." Harry shrugged at the crestfallen look on her face. Either she was an excellent actress, or she didn't know Harry was supposed to be angry with her. Frankly, Harry himself wasn't sure about that, but he knew he was angry about last year in general, and some of it seemed to be pointed her way. He just hoped she didn't have anything to do with his memory being spotty.

"Well, if you need my help, just ask," Granger offered as they went their separate ways.

Grumbling under his breath, Harry continued to his seat in History class. He arrived in the room, sat and began working on his notes some more. When the class started, he switched from the independent study notes to notes on the text, until he took care of the chapter he'd been working on. By his estimation, Harry was about a chapter ahead of Binns' lecture, but wasn't going to stop or slow down any time soon, on account of how boring the class was otherwise.

Returning to the notes for Transfiguration, Harry kept his mind occupied for the entire class. He almost didn't recognize the sound of the class being let out, and thus scrambled to gather his supplies together to leave. He dashed to the Common Room, dropped off his gear, and started for the Quidditch Pitch. He certainly didn't want to be late.

On the Quidditch Pitch, Harry was rather shocked at the turnout. He'd heard that only a few students were trying for positions, so he wondered why there were so many in the stands. As he got closer, a fifth year he wasn't sure of the name of grinned at him. "Here to watch Malfoy get the Seeker position, Potter?"

"I thought there was someone else trying out," Harry questioned, trying not to give himself away.

"Yeah, but Malfoy's father offered to buy new brooms for our team if he got the position, so it's more or less guaranteed." The other boy grimaced, "Unless the other kid trying out is a natural, anyway."

The first thought in Harry's head was asking about why the other boy didn't know he was trying out. After that moment, the thought popped into his head; he could cry off, and have some free time. But he really wanted to see the Slytherins win on their own merit. Malfoy might be a better player, but Harry had been working with the others for much of the last year. Sighing, Harry stepped down from the stands and started walking to where the others trying out were. The fifth year yelled at him, "You're too small for Chaser, Potter, what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm the other one trying out for Seeker," Harry called back, not looking.

"Great way to announce it," Flint was grinning so widely, Harry began to wonder if he'd been set up, "We had been keeping your name out of the list, in case you wanted to back out. You can still give up, we could use the brooms."

Malfoy stepped forward, "I'd like to get the position on my own merit, thanks, so don't back out, Potter. I want to show them you're just another Half Blood upstart."

Rolling his eyes, Harry snapped back, "I'm not trying to do anything other than attend this school to the best of my ability. I'm just working my hardest at the work. If that means I do better than you, it's not my fault. You want to fix the problem, work harder."

"Okay, now that everyone's here," Flint called attention back to the matter at hand, "We can start."

As he described the procedure, he made it clear that reserve players got dibs on the positions, having been a part of the team longer. Those players would try out, and their statistics would be recorded.

When the reserves were done, then the completely new hopefuls would give it a shot. As a team, the frontline players would decide who had the best score, who would have the best rhythm with the team, and whether or not they should go with a younger player to stagger the need for replacements.

Because there were more trying out, the Chaser position would be the first filled. Harry watched the reserve Chasers play against the rest of the team. Having worked with them, Harry felt that Montague, a Third year who'd been on the reserves last year might be the best choice. But who was he to say?

During the second part of the Chaser tryouts, Harry saw a couple of Fifth years that did fairly well. He figured they might stand a chance, or might wind up as reserves. Judging by the expression on Flint's face, he was inclined to believe the latter stood more of a chance.

"Okay, that's enough!" Flint called, and everyone touched down. The incumbent team gathered and discussed their choices. Harry noticed Montague watching the group closely and walked over.

"How do you think you did?" Harry asked.

"There were two newbies that might get the position, but my being on the reserves means I have a leg up. None of the other reserves were really trying, they like being the back-up." The older boy grimaced, "It's not a lack of ambition, but they don't like the injuries, and figure that if they can be the best back-up players, they might get on professional teams eventually."

"Good luck there, the teams don't look at back-ups from Slytherin very often," Harry muttered.

"My words exactly," Montague grinned.

The huddle broke up and Flint, smirking at the Third and Second year, nodded, "The team has spoken. While there were five possibilities, we went with the choice that had the best fit. Montague, as a Third year, and as a reserve, has the most seniority of the reserve possibilities. He also, unlike our Fourth and Fifth year potentials, has

longer to play. If it works out right, when he graduates in a few years, he'll be the only one we have to replace."

Harry staggered as Montague clapped him on the back with a rather large amount of force. The older boy was chortling as he shook hands with the rest of the team he was now going to be working directly with. As the spectators cheered, Harry smiled quietly to himself. The Slytherins weren't the warmest bunch, but they seemed to genuinely care about their Housemates. He'd seen Gryffindors leave each other behind, saying 'if you can't keep up, that's your problem,' and wondered why people liked that house so much better.

"Now for our Seeker," Flint called out, "We didn't have any on reserve, technically. The closest we've got is Potter, here, who until Malfoy showed interest, was going to be guaranteed the job."

The expression on the blonde's face was priceless, and Harry wished he had a way to record it. He was more than a little surprised, then to see another blonde, just off to the side of the pitch, with a camera in hand. Blinking, he noticed that the tie was red and gold, and had just enough of a mind to wonder why the little boy was taking such a chance, when Bole yelled out, "Hey! First Year, off the Pitch! Go back to your Common Room, or you'll lose points!"

The tiny boy jumped, his camera flashing again, this time pointed in the general direction of the Slytherins clustered on the field. He blinked a few times, grinned at Harry, and snapped another picture. Blinking dazedly, Harry wondered why in the world someone would do that, when the little boy ran up, "Mister Potter, it's so good to finally meet you! I've been wandering all over the school trying to find you to take your picture and get your autograph, but you're nowhere I can think to look, and then I get lost, and-

Cutting the breathless boy off, Harry asked, "What was this about pictures?"

"Oh, I heard about you when I was told I was a wizard, and I'm ever so grateful to you for what you did back then, because if you hadn't beaten You-Know-Who, Muggleborns like me wouldn't even get to

come to Hogwarts!" Harry wondered if this little Gryffindor ever stopped to breathe in between words as he chattered so fast.

"Look, we're in the middle of tryouts," Flint walked forward and glared, "We don't appreciate Gryffindors sneaking onto the field, trying to spy on our team."

"Oh!" the tiny boy finally seemed out of words, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize. I just saw Mister Potter and thought I might be able to finally get a chance to talk to him."

"I don't know why you're so... zealous about it," Bole snorted, "Potter's just like anyone else. Maybe a little more scatterbrained at times, but that's just because he's trying to shove too much information into his head too fast."

About to yelp indignantly, Harry was shushed quickly as Malfoy spoke up, "Go figure famous Potter would get himself a fan club."

Blinking, Harry puzzled that statement with what the Gryffindor said. Groaning, he looked around desperately, hoping Lockhart was not in the area, "Look, kid, I'm not that keen on having people follow me around. Stop. You've got your one picture. I'm not signing it, partly because I don't want to, partly because I don't think it's worth anything, and partly because no one should believe it anyway. I'm just me. Go back to your Common Room, like Bole said, and leave me alone."

Feeling like he'd kicked a kitten, Harry watched the kid wander off. Wincing, Harry turned to the rest of the participants of the tryouts, and noted the smirks, grins, and the sneer on Malfoy's face.

"Need bodyguards, Potter?" Derrick took his turn ribbing the younger boy.

"Er," Harry paused, rubbing his nose under his glasses, "Let me get back to you on that one. Okay?"

The team laughed, and Flint started to gather their attention back to the tryouts themselves. "Now that we've dealt with that, it's time to get

back to business. Potter, Malfoy, as Seekers, you can't try out like most of the rest of us. So what we're going to do is this." He and some of the other players pulled small objects from their pockets.

"We're going to charm them to fly around." Bletchley held a strip of cloth up by two fingers, "While we have you two blindfolded. Then, we're going to release them into the air, and let them fly around."

Smirking, Warrington added, "The borders will be the confines of the Quidditch Pitch, unlike in an actual game. We're too lazy to wait for them to come back otherwise."

"We have about twenty minutes until supper. So you two will have fifteen minutes to catch as many as you can. The one who catches the most, well, you won't be guaranteed the position, but it will show us who's the better Seeker." Flint explained.

"Oh yeah," Bole's voice was filled with humor as he tied the band of cloth over Harry's eyes, "And the rest of the team will be playing beater. So you'll have three people each flying after you, trying to whack you with a Bludger, as you try to catch the fake Snitches we're making."

Grumbling under his breath, Harry concentrated on not fidgeting. He didn't mind the dark, closed places, or crowds, but he wasn't keen on not being able to see when there were things to see. Finally, Harry heard the team release the little objects into the air. After a bit, a bit of wood was shoved into Harry's hand, and the blindfold removed.

Keeping a hand on each boy's shoulder, Derrick and Bole kept the two on the ground until Flint gave the okay. Taking the opportunity for what it was, Harry noted that it was a broom in his hand, and began searching for the little things in the air. When Flint whistled, Harry jumped onto the broom and took off.

Harry didn't know how much time had passed by the time he caught ten of the little monsters. He was just glad that Malfoy was too distracted to try and take them from him. Having fun keeping them in his pouch, Harry giggled to himself at the still flying objects hitting his side every so often.

A sharp whistle caught Harry's attention just as he caught his fifteenth flying object. He looked down, and noted that Flint was waving to the ground. A yell in the distance caused the boy to look behind him, and he just barely dodged the Bludger flying his way. Oddly, he didn't remember much trouble with those when he was flying earlier.

Touching down, Harry noticed the sour look on Malfoy's face. The blonde's hair was strewn all over his head, and he looked more than a little flustered.

"Malfoy, how many did you catch?" Flint asked.

"Ten," the blonde hissed "And your beaters targeted me, I'm sure."

"If you can't take it when it's your teammates, how do you think you'll do against say, the Gryffindors?" Bletchley groused.

Casting the Ending Charm, the older students tried to catch the four falling clumps of metal. Looking up, Flint did the math, "So, Potter, that means you have fifteen, right?"

Nodding, Harry pulled the now calm and immobile objects from his pouch, setting all fifteen on the ground. Clasping a hand on the smaller boy's shoulder, Bole laughed, "Hey Potter, do you think you could fly that erratically in a game? We couldn't keep up with you!"

"Er," Harry blinked, "Sorry?"

The rest of the team laughed, and Harry skittered out from under Bole's hand. He refused to meet Malfoy's gaze, and started toward the stands. Hopping onto a seat, Harry waited while the team, including Montague, discussed the results. After a bit, Flint walked to Malfoy. The blonde boy grumbled, but nodded, and Flint walked to Harry.

"So, we decided that we'd like both of you on the team. I got the others to admit they were actively targeting Malfoy, and left you alone. So the fact that he was doing as well as he did speaks for his skill. However, you do have a better eye for spotting things, so we'd like

you on the active roster. That good with you Potter, or are the professors piling too many independent studies on you?"

"I'll at least give it a shot," Harry shrugged, "If nothing else, I can back away to reserve and let Malfoy have the position, right?"

"Since it would be because of classes instead of lack of drive, we'll allow it," Flint wasn't happy, "But do everything you can to keep that from happening or we would just as well have let Malfoy have the spot. We do need the brooms you know."

Nodding, Harry swore he'd tough it out as long as possible. With that, everyone cleaned up and headed to the Great Hall for supper. So many of them were tired that the table was even quieter than usual.

Leaving as he finished eating, Harry headed back down to the dungeons for his detention. Tired as he was, he knew he'd be identifying the remains on cauldrons as he cleaned them. He, sadly, was so tired that he never even thought to ask Professor Snape about where he would stay at the end of the year.

When he was released, Harry trudged, more than half asleep, to the Common Room, and waved at those who called his name. Not conscious enough to be coherent, the others noticed and didn't hold his silence against him. Reaching the Second Years' room, he changed into sleeping clothes, climbed onto his bed, and passed out. He didn't even climb under the blankets.

There's a reason for McGonagall's madness. Just like I hope there's a reason for mine. Hee. As far as Creevey goes, I figured it was about time to introduce the lad. Not to mention Gin-Gin made an appearance. Finally. It's blessed hard trying to give Harry time to ask the twins about why they picked him up, not to mention finding a way for Harry to ask about custody rules. I knew I was keeping the kid busy, but this is... oi.

Please don't shoot me for the Seeker tryouts, I had no clue what else to do. The reason it wasn't redone or Malfoy chosen over Harry is that the other Slytherins haven't completely lost their hope that the rest of the world can see them as something other than 'Slimy

Slytherins,' and want to see if not cheating will help. Let's see if it does any good.

September ended, and October began. Harry did his best to keep up in classes, while training for Quidditch, and finishing his month of detentions. Throwing in his research for the Transfiguration and Charms studies, and the late nights helping Longbottom left the boy more than a little sleepless. Thus as time passed, his temper was more than frayed, it was almost non-existent.

When Slytherin played Ravenclaw, Harry was pulled aside by Flint, who said, "Listen, Potter, we know you're running on spiders' webs at this point, but don't let that keep you from catching the Snitch. Chang's not bad, but you're better. You win this, and we'll double-check your essays due for the next week while you sleep the rest of the day away. Got that?"

"While you're at it," Bole passed within hearing range, but kept well out of hitting, "If you don't feel up to it, say so now, and we'll substitute Malfoy in. You can catch up on sleep, and the team won't bother you any more."

"I didn't practice myself to this point only to back down now." Hissing, Harry glared at the taller boys, "I'm going to fly, I'm going to play, and I'm going to catch that Snitch. If you have a problem, talk to a wall, 'cause I'm not listening!"

If he'd been less sleep-deprived, Harry not only wouldn't have ended the conversation like that, he might have also appreciated the expressions on his teammates' faces. He'd even have laughed at Derrick's comment of, "Maybe we should look into the Muggle psychology books. We'll either understand his metaphors and jokes or we'll go as stark raving as he is and won't care any more."

Instead, he was muttering under his breath about being babied. He figured that if he had known they would react like that, Harry would have tried to hide how his relatives treated him after all. Just because he wasn't liked, didn't mean they had to treat him like glass. Sadly, it never occurred to him to think that they were treating him like he'd shatter because they didn't want to be there when his snappiness turned into a full tantrum. Or an explosion.

Shaking their heads and resolving to make sure the brunet got more sleep, even if someone had to sit on him, the rest of the team gathered into position for the release of the Snitch and Quaffle.

Taking to the air at the whistle, Harry watched out for the telltale flash of gold. Being in the air, like during practices, afforded him the rare treat of relaxing a bit. Of course, he had to pay some attention to the world around him or the other Seeker would catch the Snitch. Even in his state of distraction, Malfoy had only caught the Snitch before him once. It had been a week though, before the blonde had stopped bragging. By that point, not only had Harry threatened to hex him into next week, the rest of the team had caught on and decided to step in.

Catching a glimpse of gold, Harry stared. On second thought, it was just a Gryffindor flag flying. Rolling his eyes at the gesture, Harry kept scanning the air. Or he would have, but for the redhead in the stands nearby. Not that her hair color was unusual, seeing as she was the youngest Weasley. Nor did being interested in books make her stand out, except for the oddity of it while sitting in the stands during a match. The part that made it odd was that her attention wasn't rapt, and enjoying of the book, but more like spell-bound. Though he couldn't explain the difference, it seemed odd. He'd even have thought more on it if the Snitch hadn't zipped right in front of his face, with a Ravenclaw Chaser flying past in the opposite direction shortly after.

Quickly turning his broom to take chase, the boy kept his eyes focused on the winged ball. He completely forgot about anything more than the wings, and the Ravenclaw Seeker bearing down on his chase. She thought she could fly in from at an angle and beat him to it, but the Snitch showed them both up and flew sharply up into the air. Both Seekers lost sight of it, and paused long enough to glare at each other and pass jibes.

"Be sure and keep your eyes on the Pitch, Potter, not on the Gryffindor spectators," Chang smirked.

"I still spotted the Snitch before you, Chang. What does that say for your skill, oh elder one?" Harry slung back, turned his broom, and flew off towards the Slytherin section of the stands. He wanted to

ponder why Ginny, if he remembered her name right, would be entranced by a book when attending a Quidditch game. If she was more interested in the book, why even come to the game?

Instead, he forced himself to watch the sky. Being ribbed by Chang was bad enough, but he didn't want to give the older girl more ammunition. Scanning the air, he noticed that his teammates were playing according to training, and relaxed enough to listen to Jordan's rant, or as the Gryffindors preferred to call it, announce the game. "Captain Davies has the Quaffle and passes it to Lyton, who veers to the right sharply just barely avoiding Montague's attempt at fouling—"

Here the dark-haired boy stopped listening, and flew towards the announcer's section of the stands. He'd been watching the game at that point, and Lyton had flown into Montague, who'd been flying still. Halfway there, Flint whistled at the Second Year.

"Potter, watch for the Snitch! We knew coming into this they wouldn't want to believe we weren't playing dirty." The older boy returned his focus to his teammates, who had stolen the Quaffle from the Ravenclaw's attempt at passing.

Grumbling to himself, Harry nodded and returned to watching the game. He slowly drifted upward, back towards the tops of the viewing towers at each corner of the field. Once he reached a height that felt suitable to him, the Slytherin concentrated on spotting glints in the air.

Sadly, more than half of these came from cameras as they flashed. Some Ravenclaw parent or another must be in the crowd, as Harry had learned through his work with the team last year that no Slytherin parent would touch a camera. They were too plebian. And that was Bletchley's word, not Harry's. That statement had led the smaller child to research the invention of the film wizarding cameras used, and he was more than gratified to learn it had been a Slytherin creation. He was wondering when would be a good time to inform the others of this, when he spotted the telltale glint again. He flew after it, and was more than annoyed to find Chang employing the same tactics as before. So, he veered off course, away from the Snitch, briefly, to test if she was following her competition, or the actual target, and learned that she hadn't spotted the silly thing. Smirking, Harry tucked into a

dive towards the grounds, as though the tiny ball had swung in that direction. She followed.

Harry thought he'd heard the older students refer to a tactic of Seekers to trick their opponents. He'd never seen them write down the name of the maneuver, but he thought it was a Wonky Faint. It made sense to him, because the description he'd heard would have a Seeker diving at the ground, pulling up only at the last possible second. He joked to himself that all those not off in the head would faint before trying that stunt. He'd briefly entertained spelling it as Feint, since the move, ultimately was one, but he didn't know what good it was to call it a Wonky Feint, because it didn't exactly make sense.

He recalled his attention to the ground rushing towards him as he realized that in his distraction, he'd made it to within ten feet of the grass, still had Chang on his tail, and had somehow managed to actually drive himself back into the path of the Snitch. Which, for its part, seemed fond of the idea of plowing into the ground at top speed. When the distance had dropped from ten to one foot from the ground, the Snitch finally changed course to run parallel to the grass, and Harry, struggling, changed course to match. Of course, he was more than just one foot in the air, but that was better than Chang could say. She had either lost control of her broom, or wasn't that good of a flyer, as she was currently getting a personal inspection of both the taste of the Pitch, and the strength of her teeth.

Harry only spared half an ear to the Gryffindor announcer ranting about how he'd obviously fouled the other Seeker, near Wonky Faint notwithstanding. Then he blinked and realized he'd been hearing the name of the move wrong. Hearing 'Wronski' made it all make sense. He'd heard of the man before, but couldn't connect his invention of a Seeker tactic with 'Wonky' and thus never caught on. Though the Wonky Faint had seemed more than a little similar to the Continental European's scare-the-opponent-into-the-ground trick.

Resolving that for later, he returned his focus to the Snitch, which had jumped back upward, and pursued it. Shortly, he thought he heard Chang return to the air, but by that time, he was ignoring the rest of the world. The only intrusion to this was when he caught the fluttery

bit of metal in his hand, and a huff sounded next to him. Looking in the direction of the noise, Harry saw Chang snarling and flipping her broom back to the ground, not bothering to make sure she didn't clip the other players in the air.

Regaining his balance on the broom, Harry muttered about poor sportsmanship, and let the broom sink towards the ground in a gentle motion, still clutching the Snitch rather tightly. As he reached the right level, he could hear Jordan mumbling about Slytherin having cheated as everyone knew they always did, and was heartened when McGonagall shushed him. He was even happier to see the twins stand from their positions near the announcer in the stands, and move away.

It was when he reached the ground at the bottom of the pitch that Harry realized something was going on. For one thing, the entire team was waiting on him. "I didn't take that long, did I?"

"Potter, you won us our first game honestly played this year." Montague breathed.

"While we've won," Flint smirked, "We did still have to use our old tactics most of the time to do so. Now we won't even have to do that. Long as you're still willing to play, Potter."

"I'd like to," Harry started fidgeting.

"If schoolwork impedes, we'll understand," Bletchley laughed half way through his sentence, "We'll get over it. We always have. Doesn't mean we won't whinge about it in the common room, but we won't harass you into it like a certain Gryffindor Team Captain would have."

The boys settled their brooms in the team locker room's usually created space for them. Afterwards, they cleaned themselves up and headed for the Great Hall. If anyone had dreamt that the victory would have dulled Harry's temper, they were about to be proven painfully wrong.

Just outside the doors of the Great Hall, in full view of the rest of the school, sitting, standing, and walking as they might have been, Harry

heard a phrase that ruined his day. Really, his night too, but most especially his day. When he heard Ron loudly complaining about having to attend school with Junior Deatheaters that couldn't even win a Quidditch game without cheating or throwing the other Seekers off their brooms, his control snapped. He stalked up to the taller, burlier boy, and glared up at him. If he'd been in his own mind, he'd have laughed at the redhead's backing into a wall to get away.

Instead, he followed the freckled boy, and when the other boy was backed into the wall as far as he could get, Harry snarled at him, "Are you a Muggle-obsessed tinkerer because your father is? If not, why should we be guaranteed to be Death Eaters just because some of our parents were, were accused of it, or were merely suspected of it?"

With that, the brunet stomped his foot, hard as he could, on Ron's instep, and the resulting howl rather surprised him. He wasn't surprised though, when Professor McGonagall stalked over from the head table, and demanded an explanation for what was going on. He was rather amazed when Granger piped up about Ron accusing the Slytherin children of being Death Eaters in training.

Looking sour, the Transfiguration professor stood for a moment, silent. When she spoke, her voice was low and tight, "Mister Weasley, you will refrain from such accusations. Keep in mind that the parents of some of these children can sue your family for defamation of character, should they feel the need for vindication. For your foolishness, you will serve detention tomorrow night with Mister Filch. Mister Potter, you will, in future refrain from physical violence to emphasize your points. If you can't deal with the stress, cut out an activity or another to give yourself more time. You will serve detention with Professor Snape tonight. Ten points from both houses for this altercation, and I do hope you aren't foolish enough to do this again."

Vaguely, the brunet wondered why the rest of the school hadn't butted in, but that question was answered quickly by the Quidditch team clustering around him. Oddly, even Malfoy joined in on the wall of bodies.

"We'll get you to the Common Room and warn Professor Snape about this," Warrington piped up.

"You focus on sleeping until one of us fetches you for your detention," Bole laughed, "Remind me to never push your buttons when you're already short-tempered. It seems to hurt one's feet quite a bit."

Harry wondered to himself why the whole team was clustered around him, and even Malfoy. He started to figure it was because of the win he'd helped them to earn that way, but realized that it couldn't just be that. He began to wonder why they felt it was so important to bustle him to the Common Room. As they rounded the corner that led to the hall before the dungeons, the group encountered Harry's least favorite person in the school, even past Filch.

Classes with Lockhart had followed the pattern set in the earliest class to this day. Lockhart would describe a situation from his book for a time, and then would feel the need to act it out. Harry, somehow, was the favored actor to play the monsters. He'd tentatively asked Professor Snape if something could be done about it, and the adult had evasively answered with, 'I'll have to ask the Headmaster,' and had yet to get back to the boy on the subject. The poor boy felt like he was turning the Potions Master into an agony aunt, though he wasn't sure the man would know what one of those was.

The more reenactments the boy was forced through, the more he was reminded of the year before, though he couldn't quite figure out why. It was bothering him enough that if he'd had time, he would have walked to the Infirmary, asked Madam Pomfrey to do a scan on his head, and release whatever was blocking his memories of the end of the last year. He figured it had something to do with death, as he'd looked up Thestrals and had seen the criteria for seeing them. Knowing that gave him an idea of why Professor McGonagall was so warm towards him. At least, he thought that was her reason.

Drawn back out of this thoughts by the fop's words, Harry realized he'd been asked a question, "Sorry, sir?"

"Why do you have yourself surrounded, Mister Potter? Are you working towards training them into being your bodyguards for when

you finally make it big in the Wizarding world?" the man was fiddling with his hair, and Harry suddenly had the random thought that he actually set it into curlers at night, but wasn't going to voice that thought in random hallways, no matter how much he wanted to laugh.

"He lost his temper in the Great Hall, Professor, and got himself a detention for tonight," Flint responded, not knowing what was on its way.

"Oh, I see," Lockhart grinned suddenly, and shook a finger at Harry, "You should know that if you want my attention, you only need ask! I'd be happy to take over your detention, so I'll talk to Professor Dumbledore about getting it changed!"

The man then blithely sauntered off, humming a ditty that would have been toe-tappingly beautiful, if he could carry a tune. Groaning mentally, then physically, Harry turned to the Quidditch Captain and asked, "Did you have to tell him that?"

"I didn't realize he was going to do that, Potter, sorry," Flint turned his gaze away from the accusative green eyes focused on him.

"I'll tell you this now, if you don't already know it by heart then." Harry rubbed his forehead gingerly, the anger was filtering out, being replaced by a deep need to curl up and snore. "He has me stand in front of the class each time, and he casts a spell on me, prances about the room yapping about how he used that spell on whatever creature he defeated in whichever book he's quoting from. And when class lets out, he conveniently forgets to free me. Some days I can't free myself."

"That sounds worse than last year, when Quirrell would use you for target practice in front of the class," Bletchley breathed.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner? We'd have turned it in to Professor Snape!" Flint yelped.

"I already have," Harry sighed. "He said he'd do what he could, but didn't sound too hopeful."

"What is it about you, Potter, and the Defense teachers targeting you in class?" Bole shook his head.

With this second mention of last year, Harry found himself rubbing his head again. The pain that had started after Bletchley had mentioned Quirrell, and had gotten worse when the word Defense came up. He was inclined to believe there was something to it, but he was quite sleepy. Sleepy enough that he was summarily dragged to the Second Year quarters, and pushed to his bed, and told to nap.

When he woke later, Harry glanced around the room to find either the time of day or who or what had woken him. He met Malfoy's gaze, and the blonde boy blinked, then sneered. "Your face soured rather badly when last year was mentioned. It has all this year. You get especially bad when someone mentions Quirrell, Defense and the events of last year in any combination. Why's that?"

Speaking of which, Harry's previously pain-free head was aching again. Shaking it gently, Harry spoke, "I'm not sure, Malfoy. I just know that it happens, and I'd love for it to stop. Or to know what the connection is."

"All the same, it's about time for supper, and Lockhart did get your detention changed. You're to head to his office, instead of Professor Snape's after the meal."

Unhappily, Harry trudged out of the room, through the Common Room full of studying Seventh Years, and a couple of sleeping Third Years. As the two left thought, the sleepers woke and stood, and Harry resigned himself to having a lot of people walking to the Great Hall with him.

During supper, Harry was happily tucking away his grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup when Professor Snape swept past on his way to the Head Table. "Mister Potter, I am sure you have already been told by your Housemates, your detention has been modified. It will still take place tonight, and it will still start at seven, but the Defense instructor specifically requested that your detention this night be transferred to him. Therefore, instead of reporting to the Potions Lab, you will report to the Defense room."

Harry's appetite suddenly disappeared. Or at least that's what he told himself when the need to eat left him. Harry looked at the sandwich still on his plate and whimpered. He was glad that Professor Snape had already passed, or he'd have had to explain the sound.

"Aw, what's wrong Potter, aren't you looking forward to him fawning all over you?" Malfoy drawled.

Luckily, the blonde had stopped taking Harry's seat every chance he got, but he still regularly commented on Harry 'trying to take over Slytherin,' or snarked in some other manner. Most days, Harry didn't bother with a response. Today though was a story of an altogether different weave.

"I don't want that man near me at all. Between what I don't remember of last year, and his constantly comparing me to himself, I'd rather visit Hagrid's hut covered in honey when the man's trying to tame bears!" Harry hissed.

"You sure you aren't just saying that," Malfoy asked in disbelief.

"Just remember why I have a detention in the first place, Malfoy. I might just decide to take another one as payment for making you shut up for a few minutes," Harry glared.

Deciding that it was best to get the detention over with as quickly as possible, Harry stood and headed for the Defense room. The fop had left earlier, and thus the child felt safe heading over already.

The detention, though it left Harry's hand in a cramp that was all too familiar by now, and boring beyond belief, was at least no more challenging than having to deal with Lockhart in close quarters. Admittedly, if he had to listen to the details from Year with the Yeti one more time, Harry was going to write the word blue all over the walls, getting a detention or being expelled didn't matter. The only punishments that scared him now were detentions with the man again.

"Now, if you'll finish that stack of autographs, Harry, I'll just turn this stack over to you and you can work on them as well." Lockhart pointed back and forth betwixt the piles he referred to, and Harry groaned.

A chime sounded, and Lockhart jumped. He looked around the room, and Harry noticed a clock on the wall that said there were five minutes to curfew, "Sir? Do you think I could be released, seeing as there's five minutes for me to get back to my Common Room?"

"Ah, yes, yes, that would be a good idea," the grinning goof waved Harry off distractedly, "Now, just so you know, if you're that desperate for my attention, or that eager to compete with me for popularity, you need only ask. I would be glad to oblige, though you will have to be prepared to lose any popularity contests we might have between ourselves."

Perplexed, Harry shook his head and left the room. Moving quickly to the Slytherin corridors, the boy wondered to himself why the man would think Harry had wanted his attention, when Lockhart was the one who made a special request of the detention. With a final shake of his head, Harry turned towards a downward staircase, and paused. He thought he'd heard hissing. There were no gas pipes in Hogwarts, so there shouldn't be any hissing like that, should there?

Concentrating, Harry realized that the hissing was actually words. 'Kill, kill now, must kill,' and the like, were chanted over and over. He tried to get closer to the walls to hear better, but the speaking stopped. He stopped walking as well, and realized he was standing in a puddle of water. Looking around, he saw the door to the girls' bathroom that everyone said was broken. It didn't matter how many times someone was sent to repair it, it re-broke within a day. Obviously, as a boy, Harry had no clue what caused this, but knew there was a ghost nearby named Moaning Myrtle.

Walking further into the puddle, hoping to see Myrtle and get a clue as to what was going on, Harry was forced to stop, as he spotted the writing on the wall. It read 'Enemies of the Heir, beware,' and Harry wondered what kind of heir would paint red letters on a wall as a greeting.

Freezing, Harry noticed the cat hanging by her tail from one of the sconces in the wall. He gasped for air, rather futilely, and could only hope and pray that the cat was just stuffed, and wasn't actually Mrs. Norris. He didn't have time to think more on the subject, as a patrolling Prefect spotted the situation and began screaming at the top of his lungs.

Cringing and flinching, Harry curled into a small ball. It wasn't long before the hallway was crowded by gawking and grumbling students, even though curfew by now had passed. Belatedly realizing that he'd sat down in a puddle, Harry blessed his for once lucky stars that he hadn't sat all the way down or he'd have wet trousers and underclothes to add to his discomfort. The crowd began parting and Professors pushed through.

"All right, that's enough gawking," Professor McGonagall called out, "Prefects, take your Housemates back to their Common Rooms, and leave the matter to us."

"What about Potter?" The prefect who'd hollered pointed.

"We'll deal with him as well. Now do as you're told!" Snape snarled.

The rest of the students reluctantly scattered, under orders. When the hall emptied, Harry stood again, cautiously. Just as he was about to take a step away from his crouching position, Filch stalked into the hall, yelling. "Mrs. Norris? Where did you say she was?"

The bottom of Harry's stomach felt like it had disappeared. He just knew that Filch was going to blame him for the event, though he'd no clues as to what happened. Accordingly, he tried to quietly sidle up to his Head of House. Hopefully, he'd be able to tell the man about hearing someone through the walls of the school.

"YOU!" The sudden yell startled the boy into yipping. Eyes wide, Harry could only stare as the man started towards him, hands outstretched, "You killed her! You filthy, murderous little monster!"

"She's not dead, Argus, merely Petrified," Pomfrey spoke from her position next to the cat on the ground.

"Something in the school must have snuck up behind her and froze her like that," Sprout muttered, "Luckily, we have plenty of Mandrakes to use to cure her."

"Fess up boy! I know you cast a hex on her, so's she wouldn't get you caught sneaking around anymore," still focused on the brunet child, Argus wasn't paying much attention to the women diagnosing his cat.

"I didn't, I don't know any spells that could do that. Not that wouldn't be broken by the Ending Spell." Harry paused, "I was just on my way to the common room, when I happened on the puddles. I was curious about them, sort of, and was thinking about asking Myrtle about it, but I saw that on the wall, and, and Mrs. Norris. I was hoping it wasn't her, but..." Harry trailed off, the grumpy man wasn't calming down at all. If anything, he was getting even angrier with each word the boy spoke.

"Lies!" Hissing as he took a step nearer, "You're just trying to get out of your deserved punishment! I can't prove it's you, but I'll be watching you for even one misstep. And you'd better hope I don't catch you out wandering at night, or you'll wish it had been you!"

Feeling like the last leaf in autumn, Harry looked up to Professor Snape, and whispered, "Sir, would it mean anything if I said I'd heard someone talking just before seeing this?"

"What did they say, Potter?" the man met Harry's gaze.

"Just a bunch of things about killing something," Harry paused, "but I never saw anyone, Professor."

The expression that crossed the Potions Master's face was so complex Harry could have spent the rest of the night trying to decipher. And he still wouldn't have gotten all the details figured out. Harry just counted himself lucky that the other three adults, McGonagall, Pomfrey and Sprout were more focused on the petrified feline. A moment later, his Head of House made it clear Harry wasn't the only one.

"Don't bring that up to anyone else at this time," He hissed to the second year. "Right now, it will only seem like you've become unstable, and they'll assume you truly are the culprit, proof or no."

Nodding, Harry sighed as the Professor informed the three women that he'd be taking Harry back to Slytherin, as it was quite obviously after curfew and the boy couldn't travel back on his own. Filch's vendetta notwithstanding.

Shortly before they reached the dungeons, Snape spoke up, "Exactly what did you hear, and where were you?"

"I was taking a shorter route back to the Common Room from L-Professor Lockhart's office after detention. He had me signing autographs 'til five minutes from curfew, so I was hoping a shortcut would get me back faster. Instead, I heard what sounded like pipes hissing at first, then it formed into words."

"Then you reached the crossing of the girls' bathroom and saw the water, the words and the cat?" The two had just entered the dungeon hallways, and Harry hoped he wasn't about to get another detention. Just before the Common Room door, Snape spoke again, "Potter, do not dwell overmuch on this. Concentrate on your classwork. If you seem distracted, Filch will read it as some sort of proof and will be even worse. Considering whom your father was, he hates you already, but this, this will only make it worse. Even if you can prove it wasn't you, he'll forever blame you."

Nodding as they walked into the Slytherin Common Room, Harry peered in, and mentally groaned at the curiosity shown in every nook and cranny. It seemed even the furniture wanted Harry to spill his guts- though none of the people there would likely know the meaning behind the expression.

"Mister Potter is not answering questions concerning tonight's events. Just know that the cat was Petrified, is not dead, and there is a chance that whatever or whomever did this could strike again. In fact, they are quite likely to." Snape looked around, and seemed to rest his gaze on Malfoy for just a bit longer than the rest of the room, "This

means we band together even more firmly before. There will be no more of this rivalry between Malfoy and Potter. If I hear any more of it outside of the Common Room, I will personally see to it that you two are bound at the wrist, as was done to Misters Malfoy and Weasley last year. Is that clear?"

Nodding rapidly, Harry was glad to have some way to shut the blonde up outside of the Common Room. Judging by the looks on the older students' faces, so were they. Malfoy reluctantly assented to the order, and from there everyone was dismissed. Harry, feeling the events of the night catching up to him, went straight to the second year room and prepared for bed.

Half expecting to be bombarded in the room, he was pleasantly surprised by Nott, Goyle and Bulstrode snagging Malfoy's attention with sudden pleas for help in their Transfiguration assignments. As he prepared for bed, Harry resolved to give the trio something for their pains. Especially as he'd helped them with that part of the assignment earlier in the week.

So, what do you think of the first petrification? I'm not entirely sure why this new version includes another Quidditch match, but it does now. I suppose that's the best way to start hinting at Ginny's existence. I swear, I'm not trying to shut her out, she's just a little obsessed with her book to be out chatting me up.

Five points to 'Reviewer 23423' for pointing out that chapter three repeated chapter two at its end. Eh-heh... oops. Darn Italics. They're kicking me in the nose lately.

In the days following the petrification of Mrs. Norris, Harry found himself surprised by the school's reaction. Sadly, this was not a pleasant surprise, and it revealed to him that even though his opinion had dropped from the year before, he apparently still had too high a view of his fellow students. More often than not, when he passed a Gryffindor in the halls, they hissed at him in poor renditions of cats. Hufflepuffs shied away, and some even took to reciting their family histories.

When he asked what the reason was, it was explained who the 'Heir' had been in the message. He was also informed of whom the general belief listed the Heir as. Flabbergasted, Harry grumbled to himself about how unbelievable it was. They wanted to call him the Boy-Who-Lived, but he was still apparently capable of such cruelty to animals.

Thus, he felt compelled to research the phenomenon, in hopes of proving beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he could not be the Heir. Luckily, this didn't require much more time than setting Granger to the task, and it kept her off his case about wanting to help him and the twins at the same time. Afterwards, Harry sometimes felt guilty, when he saw the girl lugging huge tomes around, but then he remembered the stacks in front of him, and shook himself back out of it. After all, she had volunteered.

Within the time it took the Gryffindors to have their match with Hufflepuff, Harry had more or less finished the initial stages of research for the Charms project. He'd found mentions of all the possible duplicating charms available, and had enough to write a paragraph or two about each. In fact, he had a draft of the paper written, and was about to turn it in to Flitwick for corrections. At the same time, he'd managed to get notes from the twins- another reason he was happy he'd talked them into taking them the year before- about transfiguring objects to resemble living things.

It seemed a natural progression to him to move into actually transfiguring the inanimate to the animate, but he didn't have the research to back it up. Someone, Harry suspected a Third Year Ravenclaw, had borrowed all of the Transfiguration texts that specified the process in detail enough for his essay. The poor Slytherin certainly couldn't write in the generalizations, because

McGonagall would definitely challenge him to back it up with facts, and while the twins knew it, their convoluted explanations were enough to send him back to his own Common Room in fits of pique and laughter alternatingly

As he was grumbling to himself about the lack of information about Transfiguration in the library, Harry was startled almost off the chair he sat in when a book was tossed to the table in front of him.

"Potter, don't just rely on the twins or the library," Derrick smirked, "Remember, you have valuable resources in the form of your own Housemates. We can help with homework, if you provide the right trade."

"That's why I've been leaving you lot alone. I don't always know what to trade for and it's better to know ahead, than to let you set the terms." Harry barely glanced at the book.

"Well, in this instance, I'm not giving you a choice." Derrick sat across from the student three years his junior, and flipped open the book he'd dropped to the table, "I checked this out from under that Ravenclaw's nose the other day, and on top of that, I have notes from when I was in that year."

"It's not a Second Year assignment," Harry jotted a note down from another book, about certain magical creatures being allowed custody of children under special circumstances. This was also nicked from a stack in front of a Ravenclaw, and Harry hoped that what the older student didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

"I'd heard that it was Third or better. That's why I gave you my notes, not Flint's or Bletchley's, or Bole's. Warrington doesn't share his notes for anything less than total shut outs in Quidditch, and the rest don't have Ravenclaw parents breathing down their backs." Derrick chuckled to himself.

"So what price are you asking for?" Harry asked as he resolved to never ask Warrington for notes.

"You told us what your relatives thought about you, and where you stayed before you got your letter. What I want to know is why the Headmaster hasn't done anything about it." Derrick asked.

Briefly, Harry toyed with the idea of taking the help and running, as the bargain was most definitely in his favor. The traits that had made the hat consider other houses, however, reared their heads, and Harry had to shake his head, "That's not a fair bargain to you, Derrick. I have no clue. I don't even know if he cares. After all, he had to have known, considering the first letter was addressed right. The ones after that were also addressed right, though my room changed after the first."

"That," Derrick seemed to have an 'ah-ha' moment, and then Harry saw what might have been his first genuine smile out of an older student of Slytherin, "There's a book that details all of the children slated to attend Hogwarts, and a spell is attached to it. It takes the letters Professor McGonagall has to sign, and automatically posts them, according to the signatures of the witches and wizards in the book. Sometimes, like when it's a Mud- er, Muggleborn, a secondary missive is sent out, for the Professors to introduce themselves a bit better, but other than that, the Headmaster probably didn't even know you lived where you did."

"You're sure of that?" Harry was skeptical.

"I've not seen the book, but that's what I was told when I was a first year. There were apparently some Ravenclaw First Years who asked, and it left our Prefects of that year having to explain what the fuss was about." Derrick leaned back in his chair.

"So, is that payment enough?" Harry peered at the older boy from the corner of his eyes.

"For now. I say, use the book and notes, and if you want any more, go find the Headmaster and actually ask why he never checked up on you or anything, and then get back to me." With that, the older boy stood and left the room.

Trying not to give away how desperate he was for information for his Transfiguration assignment, Harry gingerly, though quickly pulled the loaned text to himself, and skimmed it. Shortly after, he knew why Derrick was content with the price paid for that information. The book went over details Harry already did know, only in a little more detail. The notes themselves, covered specific instances, and thus were too specific. Rolling his eyes, Harry mentally- for once- grumbled about how he couldn't get a happy medium.

Giving up for the time being on his Transfiguration research -of course, after taking all the notes he could- Harry left the Common Room for the Headquarters he and the twins still worked from. He wasn't sure whether the twins would be there or not, but if they weren't, the younger boy wouldn't complain. He'd take the opportunity to argue with the Marauder's Map.

Once he'd first arrived at the school, he challenged the map about the will, and that had caused the quartet to argue amongst themselves in what looked to Harry to be gibberish. When they calmed down, the most volatile of the four, Padfoot, had written about how they didn't know, as the map had been finished long before they'd have thought of making a will for the entire group. He'd gone on to say that for Harry to have found such a thing, however, he'd have to either be related to one of them, or friends with someone who was. Ironically, Padfoot seemed inclined to believe Harry might be a cousin of his.

Occasionally, he'd wake the map for pointers on his own maps- still incomplete, but progressing- thanks to Mister Moony. Every so often, especially after the rest of the school particularly irked him about the 'Heir' business, Harry would pick on the particularly stubborn members of the Marauders. He had a lot of fun prodding Mister Padfoot and Mister Wormtail into nonsensical writings. Partly because he knew they were playing along. They still didn't like that he was a Slytherin, but he liked to think he'd just about gotten them to the point of not hating him just for that fact.

Luckily for his mindset that day, the twins were in the hidden room, and Harry finally remembered to ask his big question before any other. His problem was that he had so many projects in the air, he'd ask about one of those, forgetting he really wanted to know the

answer to another, and would wind up rushing to class and never asking the one he'd wanted to know from the middle of the summer.

"Why exactly did you two come after me?" Harry also got a thrill from making the twins jump three feet into the air, as it was usually the other way around.

"During the summer?" Fred blinked, recovering from the surprise first.

"When else?" Harry drawled.

"We got your letter asking about wizarding custody, and then you never responded to our letter." George shrugged.

"At the time, we didn't know that a house elf had held your mail, but we did worry about no response to our questions." Fred blinked, "Speaking of which, we still don't have those answers. Not quite."

"Why exactly were you asking about whether or not a witch or wizard would have custody of a child in the Muggle world as well?" George finished.

"You know what it was like when you found me at the Dursley's right?" Harry waited for the nods before continuing, "Well, that was actually better than it's been for most of my remembered life."

"They didn't hit you or anything, did they?" Fred's face seemed like to turn redder than his hair.

"No more than your mum does you," Harry shook his head and waved his hands in the air, "It was more a case of telling me things that weren't true. Only, I didn't know they weren't true 'til Hagrid showed up, trying to get my letter of acceptance to me."

"So they kept your mail from you, locked you up, tried to keep you from attending Hogwarts," George listed.

"What else did they do?" Fred hissed.

"Er," Harry blinked, "I thought this was going to be about why you came after me, not about what my relatives thought of me."

"You want custody of you revoked from their names?" In a rare moment, George reminded Harry of Percy, whom the younger boy was beginning to think he should have approached with this.

"I think we need to take this to Percy," Fred nodded to this twin, and the two promptly cupped hands under Harry's arms, and hoisted the smaller student into the air in that manner. They hefted him to the entrance to Gryffindor's Common Room, and then George promptly spoke up.

"Ma'am," he spoke to the portrait, that of a woman wrapped in a diaphanous pink gown, smothered in lace, frills and flowers. Harry now knew why he'd overheard Gryffindors talking about 'the Fat Lady,' and resolved to keep his own thoughts to himself. She looked rather like he thought Aunt Petunia might, if she were as big as Vernon, or even Dudley.

"Yes dear, what did you need?" her gaze strayed to the smaller student standing between the two redheads, and she flinched and gasped, "A Slytherin? I do hope you aren't intending to let him into the Common Room, that would certainly get my frame removed to another location!"

Before Harry could ask why, the twins reassured her they only wanted their elder brother to come out for a chat, and said Prefect was shortly after clambering his way through. Harry caught a glimpse of the colors of flame all over the room, and shivered in the cool air. When the twins let him go, he was returning to his own Common Room, and curling up in front of the fire.

"Fred, George, what is this about?" Percy caught sight of Harry, "Hello, Potter, do you know what these two are up to?"

"Harry told us some about his home life, Perce." Fred leaned toward his elder brother.

"And?" Percy stopped peering at the younger boy and met the twin's gaze.

"We think dad needs to know, to file it," George added.

"Wait, I think Professor Snape already has filed it," Harry shook his head.

"At the least, we can look into it," Percy shrugged, "Shall we?"

Feeling distinctly unsettled, Harry was half led, half frog-marched to the office door of his own Head of House. There, the eldest Weasley in the school knocked, and all three redheads stood back a pace.

Briefly, the youngest in the group toyed with the thought of dashing off. As if knowing the thoughts scattered in front of it, the door swept open, revealing the Potions Master. Scowling, he stepped back and allowed the quartet in to his office.

"What is the problem, Misters Weasley and Potter?" Snape drawled.

"Harry asked us why we came to rescue him during the summer," Fred started.

"So we told him, and learned what his treatment at that place was usually like," George continued.

"And when we started talking about filing it, he mentioned that you might already have done so," Percy finished, and Harry wondered if he'd survive the backlash if he mentioned the twins and Percy as convincing triplets.

"He reported to me that he didn't feel disposed to returning at the end of last year," Snape stood in front of his desk. "I have filed the paperwork concerning that. Mister Potter also reported to me the retrieval from his abode during the summer. I have since been apprised of factors of his life there, but have not completed the paperwork sent to me to initiate an investigation of these events. The house was observed, I was told, during the summer, but I have not been informed of their findings."

"When?" Harry blinked, "I never noticed anyone watching the house!"

"That's the entire point, Mister Potter, you aren't supposed to notice. That's how they get an unbiased observation of the situation." The professor smirked as he pulled a stack of papers from his desk.

"Well, with the information we got from Harry," Fred pointed his thumb at the younger boy.

"We think we can add to your file," George nodded.

"I'm not needed any longer, am I?" Percy stepped back towards the office door.

"All three of you should write down your impressions of Mister Potter when you encountered him at the end of the summer, and what you saw in Surrey, if you were there. If you would, Misters Weasley, have your youngest brother write one as well." Snape dismissed all four boys with a sweep of his hand.

More than a little befuddled, Harry tried to pull his thoughts back together. Pausing a moment, he looked up at the three redheads, "What was all that? I just thought I'd get a simple answer."

"Harry," Fred's smile seemed stretched thinly over his face.

"Situations such as those are never simple. Not for the individuals immediately involved, nor for those who involve themselves," Percy shook his head gently.

"We can only hope that what we add to Professor Snape's report will get you out from under their roof as early as the Winter holidays," George shrugged.

"Oh," Harry blinked, "I didn't intend to return for the winter holidays. I'd already told Professor Snape that."

"Even more time for the paperwork to get filed properly," Percy nodded approvingly, "Now you should focus on your assignments,

and possibly on deciding who you would like to take you in come the summer."

After the eldest of the four left, the other three relocated back to their base, and puttered around for a bit. As the twins pulled forward a text from Charms, and muttered over a spell, Harry couldn't help but interrupt.

"People just can't break out of that one, it freezes their magic," Fred grumbled.

"They wouldn't teach it to Fourth Years if that were true," George argued.

"Why then, does Hermione know it already?" Fred raised an eyebrow.

"She's made a point of learning everything she can, whether she should know it or not," George mirrored his twin.

"Are you two talking about the Freezing Charm?" Harry blinked.

"What?" Fred whipped his head around to look at the Second Year.

"No, that's a Second Year charm, drops a body's temperature so that all they can think of is the cold," George waved a hand in the air.

"We're looking at the Frozen Charm," Fred tugged the book from under his twin's grasp and pushed it to the smaller boy, who'd walked over to their table.

Reading the words used to cast the spell, Harry remembered what Lockhart had cast upon him in the first class. The words didn't match. Quickly pulling his text out and searching for the Freezing Charm, Harry found that the words of that spell didn't match either.

"Harry?" George was peering at the younger boy warily.

"Lockhart cast a charm on me in the first class, used me as the example," Harry muttered as he compared the words of both spells, "He said it was what Granger cast in class to freeze the Cornish

Pixies in place, but if you two are right, I should have been able to break that one."

"You're breaking spells?" Fred blinked, "They don't teach that until Fifth Year, according to Percy, Charlie and Bill."

"When you have a teacher casting the spells on you and leaving you like that, you learn quickly how to concentrate on breaking them," Harry hissed.

"Lockhart's been doing that?" George matched the smaller boy for hissing.

"Wasn't it bad enough that Quirrell did?" Fred groaned.

"Who?" Harry's head started to throb.

"That's right, you don't remember actual Defense classes from last year, or the teacher. You ought to talk to Madam Pomfrey about that. Or at least Snape. Though if you talk to him, I'd wait a day." George suggested.

Harry let his head sink to the table, "I'm tired of not knowing who that guy was, what he did, or why I don't remember the Leaving Feast from last year. I want to know why I'm mad at Granger, and why I don't trust the Headmaster."

"I remember hearing that Quirrell cast spells on you in class, used you as the test dummy for them, to show everyone else." George scratched his chin.

"The end of the year, we all rushed to the Left Hall on the third floor, and ran across Fluffy just before the professors did. We helped to rescue Dean, Seamus, and Ron after they dashed in after Quirrell," Fred rubbed his nose, "but after George and I took Ron to the Infirmary with Madam Pomfrey, we don't know what happened."

"Sometimes, I wake up in the middle of the night, having seen teeth and lots of blood," Harry took his glasses off his nose, and rubbed his

eyes, "It's a counter, I suppose, to the dreams of green flashes and screams."

"You have wicked weird dreams, Harry," Fred shook his head.

"You really ought to talk to Madam Pomfrey, and do it soon," George repeated.

"Okay, okay, fine, I will," Harry put his glasses back on, and put his notes and book away, "In fact, I'll go do that now."

"Don't you have Quidditch practice about now?" Fred interrupted.

Blinking, Harry looked at the Time Charm clock face and paled, "Oh boy, Flint's gonna rake me over the coals!"

Dashing as fast as he could, Harry ran for the Pitch. He hoped to be only a little bit late, as every minute late, would be a lap around the Pitch, on foot. Since the Pitch was the size of a football field, Harry really wasn't looking forward to that.

Finally reaching the locker room, the boy changed into his practice uniform quickly, but made sure to fasten things properly, as that would get him into as much trouble as being the three minutes late he was at that point. Though, the locker room being empty almost made the boy stop and think. If he was only three minutes late, the rest of the team would have still been in the locker room. So either he was even more late than that, or he'd been pranked by the twins.

Walking out onto the field, Harry looked around. For a few seconds, the brunet grumbled at the twins' prank. He was plotting his revenge when he heard the rest of the team starting to enter the field from the school, evidently on their way to the locker room. Then Harry remembered that the trio had set their Time Charms to be ten minutes fast in their headquarters for the sake of getting to places on time. It was a decision they'd made that year, having been late a few too many times for their own tastes the year before.

The rest of the team paused and looked at the boy oddly for a minute. He followed them into the dressing room, and leaned against a locker while they chattered.

"So, Potter, why were you so early to practice?" Bole asked.

"I was working on a project in a room where I'd charmed the Time Charm to be ten minutes fast. I cast it and thought I was late," Harry grumbled.

"I'd rather you were early than late, Potter," Flint snickered.

After the rest of the team changed, they reconvened on the Pitch, and started warm-ups. Stretching out muscles and working on flexibility, loosening up, and psyching themselves out for practice kept them all occupied for roughly fifteen minutes. Then Flint called for everyone to take to the air, splitting into two teams. Harry and Malfoy were the respective Seekers, and they'd play like they were facing the Gryffindors.

After a little searching, Harry distracted himself with thoughts of the rest of the school. He turned upside down on the broom as he hovered in place, and muttered to himself, "Why is it that they hail me as something special and think I'm so wonderful until something like this happens? They call me the Boy-Who-Lived, and then all of a sudden I'm evil and sneaky, and, and-"

The chuckle to his left reminded Harry he had an audience. Bletchley, from his position near the goalpost Harry was suspended in front of, asked, "Potter, you're still worried about that?"

"I don't get it, is all, Bletchley," Harry shook his head, then righted himself. Holding a little tighter to the broom, as the blood rushed from the top of his head to distribute itself properly along his extremities, Harry closed his eyes briefly. Looking at the older boy, he then continued, "Do they actually want to make me hate them? Do they want me to join Voldemort?"

With a shuddering hiss, Bletchley hissed, "Don't say his name, Potter, you don't want to know about the trouble you can cause for everyone else."

"Eh?" Harry blinked, "I'd heard that people were afraid of his name, but, trouble to cause?"

"Yes, Potter," Bletchley, forgoing manners that seemed otherwise drilled into the other Slytherins, rolled his eyes at the smaller boy, "I heard that his servants used to use his name in secret, when not faced with him. It made him mad, so he dreamt up a spell to monitor their use of his name, and then visited curses upon those who had the nerve. Hence he's called 'The Dark Lord,' 'You-Know-Who,' 'Our Lord,' 'Master,' and all that, but never, well, you know."

"Oh," Harry blinked some more. Then he spotted the Snitch that had been released for practice. The main team was playing the reserves, and though the stress wasn't the same, Harry was still competing with Malfoy for the Snitch. "When practice is over, would you talk some more about it?"

"Give me reason to, and I will," Bletchley called out as Harry zipped off in pursuit of the Snitch.

After practice, Harry puzzled over what he could use as incentive for the older boy to continue explaining why people refused to use Voldemort's name. He never quite dreamed up anything, and was more than a little distracted. The few times he pulled his thoughts together, he saw that more than half the school had noticed his distraction, and he would have wagered that they were expecting another attack to take place shortly.

Sighing to himself, Harry resolved to go to bed early. Practice had been exhausting, and they had a game the next day, bright and early. Or at least early. Who knew if the sun would grace Hogwarts with its presence?

After some reconsideration, I have retooled chapters nine through eleven, and this is what you get. It's only a little longer than before, but it ties up a few things, and leaves a few more lines open. I do

intend to deal with the memory issue soon, and the custodial one as well. My guess is that Harry's got one more summer with the Dursleys though, at the least. From there, who knows? I had someone mention that Snape seems to be telling Harry to keep his head down. I'm sorry if that seems like a bad idea, but my Snape is operating under the thought that the best way to get the boy out from under the Dursley's loving hands is to act perfectly legally with it. That means filing the paperwork and actually waiting for it to be processed. Of course, should he actually get to hear what Harry says happened...

The Frozen Charm is my attempt at fixing a problem with the Freezing Charm as pointed out to me. Hope that makes up for the mistake. I rather like it though, so even if it doesn't, I might just leave it.

Harry was shocked awake the morning of the next Quidditch match with what felt like ice water. He sat straight up in bed, glaring at Malfoy, who was grinning. That left the darker boy with no doubts as to who had cast the hex, but he did wonder if the blonde had been put up to it.

"I'm awake now, Malfoy, so you can stop chanting a second volley, or I won't be the only one soaked with cool water," Harry hissed as the blonde seemed to ready another spell. "Back off and let me shower. Hopefully, the warm water will keep me from coming down with anything."

Dressing for the game, Harry felt so fed up with the hissing and family tree listing that had been going on, that he was about to start searching for ways to become invisible without his cloak. If nothing else, having no one able to see him on his way to class should free him from hearing even one more time about this or that family having wizards for eight or nine generations. He had taken to using the information as fuel in the still ongoing- though now much quieter- feud between himself and Malfoy.

The blonde was still grumbling about Harry being an attention-seeking little snot, but he kept the comments to the Common Room. He was smart enough even to say nothing during Quidditch practice, as who knew who might be listening in to those sessions?

As he made his way to the Pitch later, Harry grumbled about how if anyone had put the other boy up to the wake-up call, they were going to find ice cubes in their own bed one day, if it meant he had to be caught placing them. He finally made it to the lockers to hear Flint's speech about the game.

"Remember you lot, since we've got Potter playing, and we made a deal with him that we'd play clean if he was our Seeker, that's what we'll continue to do. For now." The Captain met the eyes of all his teammates and kept them from grumbling. "If, after this year, they still call us no more than cheaters, we'll return to our old ways. Might as well live down to their expectations if we can't change them by being better than expected.

"Last game, we proved the team's good enough to get by without the tricks," Bole smirked, "After all, we've been practicing like this since last year, and didn't bring in any new faces to the plan."

"Usually at this point," Flint chuckled, "I'd be telling you all to play to win, no matter what, or who you broke. This time, we'll play clean. Don't break the rules, but if you see a chance to be ruthless, take it."

"There's a difference between rough and cheating, right?" Montague seemed to feel like he had to add his two cents worth, "Don't worry, we'll stay on the good side of it. For now."

The boys all grinned at each other, grasped their brooms in hand, and sauntered out of the locker room. Well, all of them except Harry. He didn't feel confident enough to saunter, but he wasn't cowering either.

Just before going through the door, Flint patted Harry roughly on the shoulder, "One thing that won't change is the way we protect our Seeker. I know you've seen how rough this game can get, but if you get hurt, know that it's because someone's genuinely trying, or we just aren't good enough to prevent it, Potter."

Nodding, Harry went out onto the Pitch as his name was called. He wasn't worried about the other team trying too hard to take him out, he was on good terms with the Beaters. After all, Fred and George wouldn't want to take out their prank plan partner before all their work bore fruit. Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Harry mounted his broom, and waited for the whistle to take his place in formation. The captains shook hands, and Hooch blew her whistle, tossing the Quaffle into the air.

As the teams took flight, Harry kept half an eye out for the Snitch. Being that the other team was Gryffindor, he knew things would be interesting. The commentator, he'd noticed from last year, was painfully biased against any team that wasn't wearing red and gold. Half tuning out the insults and jokes, Harry watched the sky.

Thus, he was a little surprised to hear Lee Jordan yelling about how Gryffindor had fouled on the Slytherin team, and wasn't that amazing that it wasn't the other way around?

Spotting the other Seeker flying near him, Harry prepared to veer off. She held a hand in the air, "Peace, Potter, I'm not out to jinx you or anything. I just thought I'd tease you about how unfair it is your Beaters aren't blasting me with Bludgers anymore.. I don't have anything to pick on Derrick and Bole now for. Not that I'm complaining about the lack of Bludgers flying my way, mind you."

A whistling noise proved her wrong as a Bludger came flying between the two, and both players laughed as they went their own directions. Harry, luckily, veered in the right direction, as shortly after he stopped turning, he spotted the Snitch. He heard the commentator's reaction to his dive as he followed the tiny golden ball, but didn't think much on it, until he realized that Jordan was gasping about how there was a Bludger following him rather single-mindedly. Sparing a peripheral glance behind him as he turned, Harry's eyes widened to see the Bludger make a rather sudden turn.

A shadow passed him, and with a rather solid 'thunk!' the leather ball was batted away. "You okay there, Harry?" Fred asked as he kept an eye out for the mad ball's return.

"For now," Harry grumbled, he'd lost the Snitch in the brief moment of shock at being nearly beaned by a single-minded Bludger.

"Seelie made us promise to keep you from getting hit too," Fred grinned, "She said that she'd as good as jinxed you just a bit ago by commenting on the lack of them flying her way, so it was only fair."

Snorting, Harry flew off, thinking the glint in the air was the Snitch. A rather high-pitched yell made the boy glance back quickly to spot his tagalong. Well, he had two. One was much better than the other, as the Gryffindor Seeker wouldn't hit him if she could help it. The other however, seemed quite enthusiastic about the idea. Inasmuch as an inanimate object could show such emotion.

Swerving and swooping, Harry watched the Snitch closely. He could, in the back of his mind, hear Seelie catching up. She wasn't that bad of a flier, old broom aside. As far as Harry could tell, his own lack of experience acting as a grain of salt in his opinion, her major problem was her fear of heights. Because of that, she held on to the broom too tightly, and more than half of the ducks and dodges the Snitch barreled through were ones she refused to try.

Returning his focus on the golden-winged ball, Harry dove sharply after it as it ducked under the stands the rest of the school sat in. He wondered in the back of his mind if Seelie was following. Truthfully, she tried. When the Bludger passed her by, not even swerving at her, she got more than a little disconcerted. Being a good little Gryffindor, she didn't even think of calling a time out, and no one else seemed to realize yet something was wrong. It was catching up rather quickly to the second year boy, so the third year girl was doing what she could to keep it from mangling his skull. Incidentally, everyone else thought she was valiantly trying to keep up with him and the Snitch.

With a sudden turn, the Snitch dove out of the stands, and Harry, not pausing, slipped through a few of the audience members to follow. A yelp and a few yells made the boy wish he dared look back, but he was going to catch that flying menace. If he'd looked back, he'd have seen the Gryffindor Seeker pull off first one shoe, then the other and fling them at the berserk ball of leather. She missed of course, but it was the thought that counted in her own mind. When the golden ball shot through the stands after the Slytherin, she tried to remain in the chase. Sadly, when the first three parts of the routine swerved downward sharply thereafter, she couldn't turn fast enough, and found herself entangled in the banners in front of the stands.

As the Snitch swung towards the ground, Harry followed, and kept on its tail as it coasted just above the grass of the pitch. Bobbing and weaving in time with it, he slowly crept upon the tiny ball, and began to look for ways to finally catch it. He wasn't about to stand on the broom, that would ruin his aerodynamics, he'd heard from the older players. But he couldn't lay low on the broom either, as that would change his balance.

Finally deciding to take a chance, he stretched out his right arm, holding tightly to the stick with his left, and leaned forward. Just as his fingers closed around the Snitch, he heard a distant yell of "Potter, watch out!" The next thing he knew, his shoulder was wrenched by the impact of the Bludger with his right arm. The pain made him nearly black out, and the impact of his body with the ground almost finished the job.

As he caught his breath, he noticed the leather monster lying on the ground; docile, as if it hadn't just cracked his forearm. Gasping, Harry transferred the winged ball from right hand to left, and looked up. The Gryffindor team had joined the Slytherin team on the ground, while Jordan spoke of how amazing that catch had been, though the reach for the Snitch with the Bludger on his back had to have been a shining Gryffindor moment from a Slytherin mind.

A whimpering sound made him look around. Part of him was convinced the noise came from his own throat, but as he met the blue eyes of the Gryffindor Seeker, he realized she was the one whining.

"Potter, your arm..." She sputtered, "It's broken!"

"No kidding, Seelie?" Flint hissed, "You'd better not have had anything to do with it, or we'll get you banned!"

"The entire situation will be investigated, no worries," Professor McGonagall, stalked towards the group, "Mister Potter, congratulations on catching the Snitch. I'd call you an honorary Gryffindor for how you did so, if it weren't for my Gryffindor Seeker's exemplary own actions. Seelie, child, if you could have been any more foolish than throwing your shoes at a Bludger, I think you'd have tried. Gryffindors, to your locker room, Slytherins, you too." The older woman took a deep breath as the two teams split off in opposite directions. She then continued, "Madam Pomfrey will tend to you, Mister Potter, and we'll-

Interrupting her, Professor Lockhart came strutting from the stands, "Never fear, for I am here! Mister Potter, you've a broken arm!"

As the boy, and really, everyone else still there, rolled their eyes, Harry muttered about stating the obvious, and then gasped as the fool reached out and prodded at his arm. The spots that appeared in his vision made Harry wonder what he'd done to deserve this, just as Madam Pomfrey, laden with a first aid kit, made it to the scene.

"Mister Potter, hold still, we'll have that arm fixed quickly," the nurse dug into her kit, and as she pulled a pain-numbing potion from it, Lockhart suddenly straightened up.

"Don't bother, Pomfrey old gal, I'll fix his arm in no time flat!" the fop waved his wand haphazardly, and muttered a few words.

Counting himself lucky that the teams had dispersed by this point, Harry very nearly cried at the sudden feeling of no bones in his forearm. Grumbling quite loudly, Pomfrey put the potion away, and instead began rummaging around for another one.

"Oh dear," Lockhart sighed, "I do suppose that's a change of pace. Well, at least your arm isn't broken anymore, Harry. I do believe I have some papers left to grade, and thus I shall get right to it. Couldn't have the children's workload suffer from lack of diligence on my part, now could we?"

Nattering as he left, Lockhart strutted off the field. Harry, however, was more than a little focused on his right arm. "Madam, what do we do about..." Trailing off, the boy wondered if denying the event would erase its happening.

"We'll first wrap that arm up so that when we get the bone restored it doesn't heal back bent," as she began the task, she explained, "If that fool hadn't interfered, we could have fixed it quickly. As it is, you'll have to stay in the Infirmary overnight. You'll get a dose of Skele-gro, and I dare say that will be an unpleasant experience."

After conjuring a stretcher underneath him, Madam Pomfrey led the boy away as she spoke, carefully measuring her steps to prevent jostling him. More than a little fuzzy, Harry would later only remember the stretcher appearing underneath him, and lifting into the air. His

next memory would be sitting in the Infirmary as the mediwitch fed him the rather foul potion.

"There now, Mister Potter," she took back the vial after he'd emptied it, "You'll feel the pins and needles at first, and that will increase throughout the night. If it gets unbearable, we can place an ice wrap around your arm, but I can't give you any pain relieving potions for several hours."

"They'll react oddly with the Skele-gro, right?" Harry blinked.

"Exactly," Harry hoped that was a proud smile, rather than a sour one on her face, but he wasn't very good at telling the difference.

Wondering why he was rather sleepy of a sudden, Harry looked up at the nurse. Her smile was now rather wan but still friendlier than Madam Pince's ever was. With a sudden sigh, he leant against the pillows behind him, and began to ponder the ingredients in the bone growth potion he'd just consumed. He supposed it might have a natural tendency to put patients to sleep, but he wished it had taken charge later, when the more painful part should be starting.

In between blinks that got longer and longer, Harry wondered how he'd get his homework done. Granted, he was done with the assignments due the next couple of days, but that didn't mean he wasn't wishing he could make more progress with his independent studies. Speaking of which, the Mandrakes the students were now taking care of had gained a new level of importance, and that thought led Harry to wonder how much longer he and Neville would be watching over them before the adults felt it was too much responsibility.

Much later, as in nearly midnight, Harry woke with a sudden sharp pain in his arm, and recognized the likelihood that the bones were really reforming now. His arm had been bound in place, against his chest, so he couldn't accidentally leave the bones with no choice but to form badly or through his skin. Looking around, Harry wondered what had woken him up, if the potion's sleep inducing properties hadn't really worn off.

He was rather amazed, though still quite sleepy, to see that Professors Sprout, Flitwick, Snape, McGonagall, and Dumbledore were circled around a bed, muttering. Madam Pomfrey bustled about, grumbling about their crowding her patients, though they couldn't feel it. Just as Harry was going to give up on hearing anything, he overheard that it was Colin Creevey this time. This left him wondering what was so important about the boy, as he was just a Gryffindor First Year. The 'this time' part of it made the brunet worry that there had been another attack, but surely there would be a crowd in here hovering over the boy. Muzzily, Harry remembered that there was a group hovering, and that had been what woke him.

A bit later, Harry decided, in the fashion of all patients drugged out of their minds, that asking for more information couldn't hurt. "Madam Pomfrey, what's wrong with Creevey?"

A gasp and suddenly the matron of the Infirmary was rushing over to his bedside. Reaching for a potion set on the nightstand by the bed, she uncapped it, and then proceeded to pour it down Harry's throat.

"Ma'am?" Harry was confused, "What?"

"Don't worry, Mister Potter," the Headmaster had followed the nurse at a more sedate pace. "We are trying to get this situation under control. You just go back to sleep and when you wake in the morning you should be healed, and will then be free to leave the Infirmary."

"Creevey's okay, though, right?" Harry persisted, even if he wasn't sure why.

"He's petrified, just as Mrs. Norris was, Mister Potter," Professor McGonagall spoke up, "And we still don't know what could have done it."

"Though quite happily we can strike your name from the list of suspects," the Potions Master sounded quite gleeful to Harry's ears. It wouldn't do any good to ask him about it until the morning, however, as the potion he'd been fed was taking effect.

With his last waking moment, Harry tried to reason out why they'd be so determined not to tell him if Creevey was okay. He'd never wanted the other boy hurt, sneaking onto the Pitch notwithstanding.

His next thought was to wonder why he saw Professors Snape, McGonagall, Sprout and Flitwick dueling in front of a Cerberus. Harry was about to ask one of them why, when he spotted Madam Hooch to his right, waving her wand, and he realized that the Cerberus was actually asleep. Not only that, but the Flying Instructor was waving her wand in time with the music playing gently in the background.

Sudden pain caused him to double over, but his mind argued over whether the pain should be in his arm or his head, and briefly, the child wanted to know why either would be true. The pain got worse, and Harry knew he wasn't moving anywhere for a while. During the short lulls of agony, Harry peered around, and caught glimpses of the professors continuing their battle against an individual with an unraveled turban on his head. That would have been odd enough if not for the fact that the brunet recognized the man as moving backwards all the time. Or rather, that his elbows and knees bent the way they should, for someone who was facing the opposite direction. As one would think the dueler was meant to be to face the Heads of House.

Another strengthening of the pain caused the boy to double up again, and when it released, Harry found himself flying across the room. Wondering how that could be, the boy then gasped in pain as hands touched his arms. When he would have woken from the pain, a spell sounded in his ears. Even though it didn't agree with the dream, Harry didn't complain. After all, *Dormus Dulces* didn't really have any place in dreams at all. It was just a wish for pleasant dreams.

Finally conscious of the fact that he was waking up, rather than suffering from extraordinarily long blinks, Harry sat up the next morning, and remembered the snippet of conversation he'd heard the previous night. He puzzled a bit, then came to the conclusion that as Creevey had been given the same fate as Mrs. Norris, the Gryffindor was probably as well off as the cat. As the mediwitch hustled into the Infirmary, Harry was rather surprised to note that there was a third

bed with a frozen occupant, and it seemed as though the third one was Sir Nick, the Gryffindor ghost.

"Ah, Mister Potter, let's have a look at that arm," She was all business as she gently unbound his right arm and inspected it. She moved it about a bit, and tested the bending abilities of each finger. "It seems to have re-formed just fine. Do be careful, and try not to over exert that arm. Even though the bones have been restored, they will be a bit brittle for a few weeks. Just drink plenty of milk, and it should settle down to normal levels. If you can stomach yogurt, eating a lot of that during that time will help as well."

Nodding at her instructions, the boy left the infirmary, and headed for the Slytherin Common Room. Luckily, the day before had been Saturday, and that left this day as a day off from classes.

When he whispered the password, Harry was just hoping to make it to his floor of rooms to gather the work for his studies, but he was hemmed in by the students waiting for him.

"Potter, we heard there was another victim last night," Parkinson spoke up first, and Harry could tell that the older students were rather peeved with her taking liberties in rank.

"There wasn't another message," a seventh year spoke up, "but no one's seen that camera-toting Muggleborn, Creevey since yesterday. Not to mention the rather distinct lack of Sir Nicholas hovering over the red and gold table at breakfast this morning."

"I don't know much more than that I saw them in the Infirmary." Harry shook his head, "I couldn't even get Madam Pomfrey to tell me anything. She hustled me out of there too quickly."

"Ah," the older students relaxed.

"You know how the school was sure you were the 'Heir'? Well, they're not so sure now." Flint smirked.

"They figure it's rather difficult for you to orchestrate the petrification of students and a ghost if you're in the Infirmary yourself." Another

seventh year chuckled, "Though if you were determined, I don't see how a simple broken bone would make much difference."

"It wasn't just a broken bone," Harry reluctantly related.

"What?" Malfoy yelped, "Now what stories are you weaving, Potter?"

"So when I overheard Snape muttering about the fop vanishing your broken bones, he wasn't just thinking wistfully or having nightmares?" Zabini yelped.

"Wait, how'd you overhear that?" Harry blinked.

"Chances are, the professor wanted you to hear that, Zabini," Flint sighed, "So the rumor's true?"

"He vanished the bones in my arm, Madam Pomfrey just let me out after dosing me with Skele-gro last night," Harry chattered, "I have a lot of work to do, so if you'll let me go?"

Derrick smiled, "We all know the work you want to do is for your extra projects. Your homework was done either the night it was assigned or the day after. You've kept that pattern up the entire time you've been here."

"That means, what are you really up to?" Flint crossed his arms in front of himself, and stared evenly at the Second Year.

"Er?" Harry shrugged, "Fine. I've been researching custody rules and laws. So far I've found such odd things as werewolves aren't allowed to have custody of any child, blood-related or not, unless there's at least two non-magical creatures willing to be full-time joint custodians. Or that a child of the Wizarding world should have a guardian of the wizarding world, and the orders of said guardian would supplant the decrees of any Muggle guardians."

"Of course," Bole blinked, "But why are you researching that?"

"He's trying to get away from the family that has him over the summers," Malfoy smirked at the rest of the Slytherins. "He owled my family over this last one."

"So your Muggle family doesn't like you, and you're looking into custody for what reason?" Zabini scratched his head, then shook it.

"I need to know if Dumbledore is or is in contact with my Wizarding guardian, because if he is, I'll never leave the Dursley's tender care. If he isn't, I might be able to talk them into getting the Ministry to move me." Harry sighed. He'd been hesitant about sharing this information because he wasn't sure how the rest of his house would react. He knew the reputation of Slytherin was only half-fabricated. He didn't want to think about the trouble this could cause him now. Especially with Malfoy and the other boy's father.

"That's not too difficult to find out," Flint grinned, "Malfoy can find that out from his father."

"What will I get in return?" Malfoy's eyes narrowed.

"Are you that eager to see Potter killed?" Derrick snapped. "At the rate they're going, those Muggles will kill him."

"Don't be so sure," Harry tried to defend the Dursleys, "They don't beat me senseless, you know."

"Sure, they just lock you up, and feed you the minimum required nutrients to survive off of." Warrington growled.

"Potter, my family might not like yours very much, but based on my letters home, my parents have nothing against you personally," Parkinson smiled, "So if you really need a new home, let me be the first to offer. I'll even send home for permission."

"What would you get out of it?" Harry narrowed his eyes, "If Malfoy is refusing to even check who my guardian is through his father without payment, why should you and yours offer shelter?"

"You see, the reason I'm freely offering is the simple fact that it will raise my family's standings in the eyes of the Wizarding world to be so charitable to the 'Boy-Who-Lived.' It's an even exchange, I should think." the girl answered.

"Too bad the Muggles aren't smart enough to catch on to that," Zabini hissed.

"Shouldn't there be some other form of payment though?" Harry asked, "Like an allowance to cover any fees incurred by my presence?"

"Those are probably automatically added to the Dursley's accounts," Bletchley snickered, "So don't let them tell you otherwise."

"What monetary units?" Harry cocked his head sideways.

"Probably a set number of Galleons per month, of course," Flint blinked, "Wait, that would be a problem wouldn't it? Those Muggles only deal in the normal, so their bank wouldn't have a clue what to do with Galleons if they bit them on the-"

"Flint!" a female Prefect spat, "You corrupt their minds enough with your jokes. Let's not add to it on my watch, got it?"

"Yes ma'am," Flint's expression spoke of how often he heard this, and the grin on his face spoke of how well he paid attention to it.

"So your relatives probably have a fortune in Galleons in their account, that they don't know about," Malfoy's eyes were calculating, "I'll have to mention this to my father. If nothing else, he might be able to discuss converting the coins with them. Provided they offer a reasonable exchange of goods."

Harry rolled his eyes at the blonde. While he was at it, he shrugged at the rest of Slytherin's interference. He really didn't want to know the cost of their help, but at this point, he was about willing to do anything to get away from the Dursleys.

"Were you researching anything else of import?" a Fourth Year girl spoke up, though she looked as though she'd be happy to go back to reading the book in front of her.

"I just wanted to know what creatures out there turn people to stone. Other than cockatrices, I don't know. Well, and Gorgons, of course." Harry shrugged.

"You're trying to figure out what creature lives in the chamber, aren't you?" Flint's eyes glinted.

"If I'm going to be accused of opening it, then cleared of it, I want to have a clue. At the least to deal with the possibility of encountering it some dark corridor or other." Harry nodded.

"Well, there aren't many creatures that can petrify ghosts, so that narrows the selection down." A Seventh year spoke up.

"And the climate narrows that even further," another Seventh Year added.

"Oh," Harry blinked. "Would I get a painful number of glares if I mentioned that I've already set Granger to researching the Heir of Slytherin stuff?"

The glares he got answered his question. "Potter, what were you thinking?" Flint hissed.

"I was getting tired of her continually asking if she could help me research something, so I gave her something to look up." Harry grumbled.

"She'll report whatever she finds to the Headmaster first and foremost," Nott spat.

"That's what she did last year when you worked with her, or did you forget?" Bulstrode added.

A fuzzy thought rang loudly in his head. As it reverberated, Harry puzzled a few details from the end of the year together, finally. "I had actually forgotten, but you bringing it up reminded me."

"Potter, you've one of the most promising minds in Slytherin, how could you let yourself forget something like that?" one of Flint's yearmates demanded.

"I saw something at the end of the year, I think, that the Headmaster didn't want me to. So from the point that the twins left the third floor corridor, to when I woke in the Infirmary is blank. And the rest is more than a little fuzzy while I'm at it."

"Your detentions at the beginning of the year?" Bole asks.

"Yeah," Harry nodded.

"Potter," the collective of Slytherin groaned, "You've really got to keep yourself out of trouble. It's not only better for your health, it's also better for our points."

"I know, believe me, I learned from last year." Grumbling to himself, Harry pieced together another bit of information, "The event I don't remember is probably the source of the points the Gryffindors were able to use to blast away our chances at the House Cup."

"Of course," Derrick mumbled, "The Headmaster favors the Gryffindors over the other three Houses. Pity he doesn't ever stop to think about the fact that it alienates the rest of us horribly."

"I think there's a lot of things he doesn't take the time to think about anymore. He seems like he's going senile," Zabini joked.

"Like the fact that tampering with the mind of a preteen is dangerous, and illegal," one more Seventh Year added to the conversation.

"What?" Harry tried not to panic.

"If we're lucky, they only Confounded you," the first Seventh Year suggested, "So if that's the case, you could ask Professor Snape for

an Ordering Potion. Of course, you'd have to tell him why, but when he hears-"

"He already knows," Harry rubbed his nose.

"He can't or he'd have done something," Malfoy spat, "He wouldn't just sit by and allow something like that to happen!"

"I told him about not remembering at the beginning of the year. He said something about Memory Charms and kept moving," Harry growled back.

"And the memories still haven't returned, Mister Potter?" a deep drawl caused the whole body of students to jump, some whirling to see their Head of House standing in the passage leading out of the Common Room.

"No, though while I was recovering from Lockhart's vanishing trick, I had a dream about the Heads of House and Madam Hooch fighting a guy in a turban who walked backwards."

"I'd say the guy in the turban was Professor Quirrell, but he never walked backwards," Bole snickered.

"Yeah, Derrick added, laughing, "He was lucky to be able to walk at all."

The name Quirrell caused Harry's head to begin pounding incessantly. Thoughts flickered through his mind, but none stuck around long enough to make a strong impression. Vaguely, Harry realized he'd been shunted to the Second Year sleeping room when he was pushed gently onto his bed.

"Mister Potter, drink this for your head," a potion shoved into his face left the boy with little choice but to do as instructed, "And sleep. You might not remember it in the morning, but at least you are making progress. Know also that I will speak with the Headmaster about the possibility of his modifying your memories, and not having mended the issue by now."

Thanks so much, reviewers for calling me on the oranges. They have since been replaced with yogurt. And yes, Seelie's just that weird that she'd try to use her shoe on a Bludger instead of something simpler. Though I wondered what would happen if she flew up to that one and tried to hug it to the ground...

I've had more than one reviewer refer to the Gryffindor favoritism, and its possible consequences, and finally had a chance to let the Slytherins verbalize. Hence, I'm sure I all but quoted one lucky soul. Smile! You've been immortalized in a fanfic! Heh heh.

I'm still not certain whether Dumbledore is painfully manipulative, or just painfully ignorant of what Harry actually needs. I don't, however, think that he's evil. Of course, don't quote me on that. This is, I hope, trying to tie up some issues I haven't otherwise had a chance to touch on.

If it weren't for the fact that the approaching date was in November rather than April, Harry wouldn't have believed the fliers on the walls. Some other students were crowded around them- mostly girls- and cooing. A somewhat hyperactive picture of Lockhart posed and winked at passersby, and written underneath, with what room was left, was a message about a Dueling Club. It made it rather clear who would be in charge, thus Harry wanted nothing to do with it.

After reading it, Harry tried to turn his back on the poster, and its message, when Malfoy approached, smirked, and spoke up, "Potter, you want to prove you're not part of Lockhart's fanclub?"

At this statement, the darker-haired boy knew he had lost, even before he began. If he said he didn't want to prove anything, he'd be assumed a member of the clucking girls' club. If, however, he said he wanted to prove something, the girls would get indignant, and while Harry could stomp Ron's instep, he wasn't about to try living in the same House as the girls who still crushed on the man. Even if they waited for him to breathe after making such a mistake, his demise would still be painful.

"Malfoy, I'm so busy with the rest of my work, I don't have time to take part in anything else. Or are you trying to get me to quit Quidditch?" Harry's best defense of late was to suggest quitting Quidditch. Ironically, Malfoy seemed to like being a Reserve Seeker, and had developed a dislike of the idea of Harry leaving the team to fend for themselves.

Malfoy's face twitched into a grin, "It's Professor Lockhart. He's required the one arrival, but likely as not, you wouldn't have to show up for anything more than that. Even if you're so busy, you should still manage with that little of a distraction."

"Why are you so determined that I be there?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Professor Lockhart, in charge of how many students on his own? I don't think so, and neither to the governors of the school." Here, the blonde sneered, "So, he will have to have an assisting Professor with him at all times. In all likelihood, he'll choose our Head of House, as

McGonagall has made it clear she can't stand him, Sprout's too frumpy for his tastes, and Flitwick's too smart."

"I hope you're not saying our Head of House isn't smart, Malfoy," Harry grumbled.

"Hardly," Malfoy grinned. Stalking past the other Slytherin, he pointed at the poster. "He's probably going to put up a fuss, to convince everyone he want nothing to do with the idea, and then in the crunch, Professor Snape will agree to it, if nothing else, to show how magnanimous we Slytherins can be. You wouldn't want to miss out on a possible lecture from our Head of House, would you?"

It was thus that, in his usual condescending manner, Malfoy managed to trick an agreement to sign up out of Harry. The day of the first club meeting approached, and Harry was still trying to worm out of it.

"Look, Potter, if you want to be the leader of our year, you have to show you're the best for the job." Malfoy drawled.

"I don't see how participating in this is going to make everyone believe I'm somehow smarter, stronger, faster or bossier than they are." Harry grumbled on the way to the Great Hall. "Besides, I never said I wanted to lead the Slytherins. I just want you all to open your eyes. You hate the fact that you're hated, so why do you hate?"

"I want to say I understood that last sentence, but I don't." Zabini laughed.

"Nice try though," Nott snickered.

With a deep sigh, Harry tried to explain as he'd done for much of the year, "I don't want to make the decisions for you, I just want to know why you feel the way you do, and saying that you were told to doesn't cut it. I also want you to know why I feel the way I do. Does that make it clear enough?"

Frustrated, flustered, and more than a little annoyed, Harry flopped down on one side of the platform that the Defense Professor had set

up. After the others had settled, he rubbed the bridge of his nose. Looking around, he met the eyes of some of his fellow snakes, "Should I just give up on this too?"

"Potter, you wouldn't be you without a crusade," Parkinson smiled, trying to gentle her next statement, "But most of us either don't care, or can't allow ourselves to."

At the nods of those around him, Harry nodded, blowing air into his bangs, "Fine. I'll throw myself into Quidditch and studying. Don't mind me when I ask why to a lot of things though."

Malfoy looked like he was going to respond, but at that moment, Lockhart, and the rest of the Houses' students entered the room with a flourish. Flouncing around and generally making a fool of himself- at least that's what Harry thought- the man called the students to look at him. Harry was rather relieved by the presence of the Potions Master in the corner of the room.

"Now, I don't want you all to be here under false impressions," Lockhart was waving his hands around in the air as he spoke. Harry tried not to laugh out loud at Snape's facial expression that actually was there. It seemed the Defense Professor was direly despised.

"I just noticed that there was a rather disappointing lack of a club for children wanting to show off their talent for dueling, and thought to fulfill that need." Lockhart stood in the center of the stage and posed. Harry, most of the boys, and even a handful of girls, winced.

Waving his hand with a wand in it one more time, the fop gestured for Professor Snape to approach the stage, "Just for the sake of my knowing my own limits, I asked for an assistant with this project, and your dear, sweet Potions Master volunteered. So, I'd like to introduce my assistant, Professor Snape!"

As the lighter-haired man gestured, Harry thought it was all Snape could do to not reach forward and strangle him. All the same, the man nodded his head once, and then twitched as the fool continued, "Don't worry, I'll return your Professor to you in one piece."

The Gryffindors barely restrained a noise somewhere between a chuckle and a groan. Brusquely, the Slytherin Head of House stalked to one end of the dais and stood. After noticing, Lockhart chattered some more, "Ah yes. That is the first indicator of our needing to move on. So, when two wizards, or a witch and a wizard, or two witches duel, the first step is to bow. This shows your respect for your opponent, regardless of if he's weaker than you or not. Some view the depth of the bow to be a sign of greater or lesser respect, others see it as a sign of acknowledging how much stronger or weaker you are."

Quickly stationing himself opposite the darker-haired adult, Lockhart held his wand upright in his hand. This was rather perfunctorily echoed by the man across from him. Explaining as he went, Lockhart showed the group assembled how to bow, to turn away from your opponent and walk a set distance away. As he told the students to turn back and cast a spell quickly, he was rather surprised by Snape's first volley.

Pulling himself from the far side of the room, Lockhart dusted himself off, "Of course, good thinking Professor Snape! Only fitting that the first thing we show them would be the Disarming Spell. I couldn't have asked for a better assistant, you read my mind. I decided it was best to show the children just what a decently cast Disarming Spell could do and went with the flow."

Harry doubted that, having seen the Defense Professor's face flood with shock as the spell flew at him. Knowing that he'd be yelled down the parapets, he kept his thoughts to himself. Though he thought he saw a smirk on Professor Snape's face.

"Now that we've shown you the basic spell for dueling, how about we split you into pairs and have you try it out?" Lockhart rushed about, matching students together.

Up until he was matched, Harry wanted to laugh. Malfoy and Ron were facing one another, and neither boy seemed eager to find out what the broken wand would actually cast. Granger and Bulstrode was another comical pairing, as the Gryffindor girl probably knew the Disarming spell backwards and forwards by now, and the Slytherin

one knew a few other spells to disarm her foes. Finnegan and Zabini were glaring at one another, and a Hufflepuff, named Justin Finch-Fletchley stood across from Thomas. Watching the rest of the students matched up, Harry began to suspect who his partner would be. As he waited, Harry didn't know whether to be happy that he probably wouldn't get hit, or to worry about the chance of getting hit with something way out there instead of a simple Disarming Spell.

With a nod as he gently pushed Longbottom in front of the green-eyed boy, Lockhart stood. Calling attention to himself again, he spoke up, "Now that we're paired off, I want you all to take turns. The word for the spell is 'Expelliarmus,' and you point in the general direction of what you want to send flying. Now, off you go!"

The instructions for casting the spell sent the brunet into a rather heavy groan. He knew, from his work with the twins, that this spell wasn't intended to send things flying. It was just meant to expel an object from a person's grasp. Harry wanted to reassure the Gryffindor in front of him, but got the feeling that Lockhart would completely misconstrue anything he said. Shaking his head slightly, he refocused on the Herbology Whiz and nodded.

A few tries later, and Neville had caused something to push at Harry's hand. Trying to listen to the other boy over the din of the rest of the room, the dark-haired boy thought the Gryffindor was stressing the 'ar' part of the spell just a bit too much. Just as he was about to suggest the change in casting, the man of the hour called attention to himself, once again.

"Now that you've all had some practice at casting the spell, I think we should see how well you do in front of your peers. Strutting back to the stage made up in the center of the room, Lockhart pointed his wand jauntily. "We will call two individuals up to the stage, and you will then face one another. From there, you will salute, bow, turn and walk away. When you've walked the requisite number of steps, you will turn and cast the Disarming Spell. If the mock battle lasts past that point, you will then be allowed to improvise."

Groaning to himself, the situation just detailed could only end badly, Harry tried to settle in for watching a really bad duel. Lockhart tried to

call Longbottom up, but then hesitated butted in, "Professor Snape, who would you suggest? I'm sure Mister Longbottom is eager for a chance to prove himself, but it seems as though Mister Malfoy or Mister Potter has better control. While I'm at it, Miss Granger and Miss Patil of Ravenclaw also seem proficient."

"It sounds to me as though you have plans laid for two different duels," Snape drawled.

"Ah, yes, perfect then," Nodding, Lockhart pointed, "Mister Potter, you and Mister Malfoy will duel. I do hope that suits your personal flair for the dramatic? I'd pit you against Miss Patil or Miss Granger, but you might just be too gentlemanly to put up a good fight. And Mister Malfoy, as we all know, would probably do the same."

Since no one actually knew that, Harry thought the statement funny, thought he kept that to himself. He certainly didn't want the Defense instructor getting ideas about being liked. At least, no more than he already had.

At the rather insistent prodding of his Housemates, Harry plodded to the stage, and clambered up. By the time the brunet had made it that far, Malfoy had already strutted up and stood in rigid posture. Harry just knew Malfoy had already been talked through the procedures, and wondered if there was a book about it somewhere, and if Granger had already checked it out. That reminded him that thus far, she claimed to have found nothing helpful in her search, which only lent strength to the older students' theories about her. Shrugging mentally, the boy reassigned his thoughts to the matter at hand.

"All right boys, you have your wands in the proper position, now bow," Lockhart detailed, and Harry wasn't surprised to see the blonde barely dip his torso when directed. It suited him just fine, as he certainly wasn't bowing any deeper.

"Now turn and take ten steps," Lockhart added, waving his hands in a manner Harry wanted to call flamboyant. Counting his steps, the boy turned on the tenth and ducked, hearing Malfoy call out. Of course, his own spell missed due to his motion, but at least he wasn't

disarmed. Sadly though, he had to wonder what the other boy was going to send at him next.

Then again, if Malfoy wasn't given the chance, Harry didn't have to worry. Quickly casting the Frozen Charm that he'd learned from the twins, he wasn't surprised to see Malfoy dodge. The return spell, looking rather fiery, left the brunet wincing as it passed his face. He remembered now the lack of limitations on spell types, and how much harm they could cause.

Racking his brain for another spell, the brunet dodged another volley from his Housemate, and decided to give the Body Bind a try. When it was evaded, Harry was already trying to muster together the words for a Tripping Hex. This line of thought was interrupted by a sudden gasp from the audience.

Shuffling through his thoughts, Harry thought the spell cast had sounded like 'Serpensortia,' and it resulted, in a snake being flung to the ground. It hissed and slithered towards the edge of the stage. Stepping forward, the two professors both moved to take care of it, but Lockhart called out first.

"Allow me, I shall deal with this!" and he spoke gibberish! Harry had heard from Longbottom what spell the man had cast in the class with the Cornish Pixies, and wasn't entirely surprised. Still, to see him waving his wand and saying, 'Naksay ogay wayay,' and acting as though it should do something. Frighteningly enough, it did, but the busy child didn't get the feeling that shocking the serpent into the air to land again was a good thing.

Having moved no closer to the reptile after its appearance, Harry was even more surprised to hear it mutter, "Pain, not safe, must defend self!" Gaping, and noticing that it was headed for the Hufflepuffs in the front row, he dashed forward, yelling at them to get away.

The expression on their faces made Harry wonder what was going on. The snake turning to look at him made him ask himself what he'd done, and hearing it ask, "Speaking?" left him trying to figure out if he'd just opened a can of worms, and he had to pardon himself for the pun.

The snake disappeared just then, as Professor Snape cast the Ending Spell, and the dark man spoke to the gathering. "With that upset, I would suggest all of you return to your Common Rooms. Remember the details of the duel, in case you should ever be foolish enough to involve yourselves in one on your own."

The room cleared out quickly, most of the students muttering about the incident with the snake, and Harry began to ask himself why they'd care what he said, he'd yelled loud enough he should have been heard. He was also puzzled as to why they hadn't listened, but that line of thought was quickly extinguished when Professor Snape called out, "Potter, to my office, and do not detour."

Approaching his fellow Slytherins, the boy was further dismayed by their reactions. Roughly half of them were calculating something, and the other half looked dismayed. Shaking his head, Harry tried to speak with Zabini, but the darker boy reiterated the Professor's orders.

"Go on, Potter, Professor Snape will definitely want to talk to you." Zabini waved the slightly shorter boy off.

Left with no choice, the brunet headed to the room he'd become frightfully well acquainted with during the first month of classes. Once he arrived, he took a seat on one of the stools on the door side of the desk and tried to figure out what was going on.

A few minutes later, and the door opened behind him. Turning, Harry met the Professor's gaze and was reminded of his confusion at understanding the snake's words. This left him ready to ask his first question. Or he would have, if the Professor hadn't asked one first.

"Do you have any clue what you have done, Mister Potter?" The lack of anger in his voice made Harry calm a touch.

Blinking a bit, Harry shook his head, "I'm sorry sir, but other than telling the Hufflepuffs to get out of the snake's way, I don't think I did anything."

A low chuckle brought the boy's level of nervousness back up to record levels. "Pity that you and the snake were the only ones to understand that."

"Professor?" Harry fidgeted, "I swear, I told them to get out of its way."

"All anyone else heard was hissing." Snape moved to his desk and sat. "I presume you understood what the snake said as it appeared and shortly before it disappeared?"

"Yes sir, but," Harry paused, "It's not the first time I've understood a snake. Last year, my cousin Dudley got to go to the zoo for his birthday, and the Dursleys couldn't find anyone to watch me, so they had to let me go too. At the zoo, they had a snake from South America behind glass. I walked up to the cage and spoke to it. It nodded, and later, the glass to its cell disappeared and it got out. I thought it was odd at the time that it said 'Thanks amigo,' to me as it slithered off."

"You have the ability to speak Parseltongue," Snape reached into his desk and removed a sheet of paper. He then took a quill and wrote on the paper, "This is a nearly extinct skill. In fact, there was, until today, only one known individual with this skill, and he is by and large presumed dead."

The sinking feeling in Harry's stomach acted as a warning, and left him not wanting to ask. He knew though, that he'd have to ask to get the conversation to continue. "Who was that, sir?"

"The Dark Lord, Mister Potter," Snape looked up from his writing, and pointed gently but decisively with the quill, "Now there is another known Speaker of Snakes."

"So I was accidentally talking to the snake instead of to the Hufflepuffs?" Harry began picking at his fingernails.

"Exactly. In fact, I would nearly wager that they were spreading the story, with Gryffindor and Ravenclaw help, that you were trying to set the snake on the Hufflepuffs."

"Sir!" Harry was indignant, "Why would they think that, I've done no harm other than to Ron, and he deserved everything he got!"

"Remember their suspicions that you were the Heir of Slytherin?" Snape drawled, "Likely this will cause them to forget your incapacitation at the last instance of stoning."

Groaning, the Second Year rubbed his head. "Why are they so eager to believe the worst of me?"

"Most of them, likely as not, believe your relatives worship the ground you walk on, and might even feel it's only a short step from Hero to Villain." Snape shook his head just a touch, then continued, "Truthfully, the reason is human nature. People often say they want to believe the best of others, but can't be bothered to put the effort into such an outlook."

"So how do I convince them that I was trying to get them to move?" Harry was picking at his fingers again.

"You'd be better off keeping company with you at all times, so that you can have people vouch for you when the next incident occurs." Snape grimaced, "Though if we have too many more incidents, the school will have to be shut down. I imagine that the Governors are already leaning on the Headmaster."

"What about researching the creature that's actually petrifying people?" Harry finally stopped fidgeting.

"Mister Potter, leave this to the adults. Chances are, if you seem to know what's going on, their belief in your perfidy will only be magnified. That will cause them to fear you even more, and might even lead to the fools doing something horribly drastic and painful."

Harry felt like curling into a little ball. He'd been writing a list of ways that the Wizarding world was better than the Muggle one, albeit

indirectly, but now he had grounds to start a new list. Thinking it over, Harry nodded to himself. He was going to start that list and see where it got him.

"Mister Potter, if you will follow me, I will guide you to your Common Room. I strongly suggest you never allow yourself to be found alone on school grounds." The Potions Master stood, and handed the dark-haired boy the sheet of paper he'd been writing on. Tempted as he was, Harry didn't read the note as he was guided to the rest of his House.

At the passage leading into the Common Room, the professor paused, and chanted a few words. The best Harry could figure was that they were meant to change something. When the man paused afterward and then spoke the word, 'Miedo,' the boy was rather surprised after the portrait opened. The rest of the House was gathered in the room, and as the two dark-haired males stepped through, all eyes swiveled to them.

"Professor, the whole House is here, not even anyone in the Infirmary." The female Seventh Year Prefect reported.

"Good, I am here to inform you not only of the password changing, but also to inform you that you are all to keep Mister Potter from being seen outside this House alone until such time as the mystery of the attacks is solved. The new password is 'Miedo,' and I have locked it as such until the end of the term. If there are no questions, I shall take my leave."

Harry watched as the adult swept out of the room, and wondered if it was his imagination that gave the cloak a bit of extra swoosh. His attention was recalled, shortly, to the rest of Slytherin, when Zabini called out to him.

"Potter, what did you say to that snake? I saw it look at you just before Professor Snape vanished it," Zabini demanded.

"I meant to be telling the Hufflepuffs to move out of its way," Harry stared at his toes as he spoke, "I didn't realize that the snake wasn't speaking English because it had been summoned."

"Look, Potter, I didn't know how that would, I didn't,-" Malfoy stuttered and Harry thought of recording the day for historical import.

"What he's trying to say, Potter, is sorry. None of us knew you were a Parselmouth, and outing you to the school like that, well. That was not our plan," Parkinson grimaced.

"I didn't know I was a Parselmouth either," Harry rubbed his hand over his forehead.

"Okay, you Second Years are going to have primary escort duty," the male Seventh Year Prefect butted in, "But the rest of us will do our part. I have a couple Ravenclaw friends who might believe me when I say you aren't the next Dark Lord. Unless you are, Potter, in which case tell us now, so we can work out some plans in that direction."

"Er," Harry blinked, "Shouldn't a decision like that wait until I could actually back it up?"

The older students chuckled and Harry blushed. Flint reached out and gingerly patted him on the back. "I want to say watch out for the Gryffindors, but you'll also catch it from the Hufflepuffs, since they'll think you were telling the snake to attack them."

"The professor already indicated that." Harry nodded. "Is it too much to hope that whoever is turning people and things to stone will turn me next? No one can figure I'm the one behind it if I'm a statue too, right?"

"Actually, Potter, the older Ravenclaws might figure that you asked your creature to turn you to stone to do just that, and relieve yourself of suspicion," another Seventh year grinned.

"Urgh," Harry rubbed his head again, "Second-guessing myself is no fun."

"I want to be the first to say that while we'll watch out for you, knowing you're a Snake Speaker is scary," Bletchley shuddered, "You-Know-

Who was one too, and I never heard of good things coming of people irking him."

"That's why I'm me, and not him, or his reincarnation," Harry snorted.  
"Okay, since we're in the Common Room, is there any way, I could ask for help in researching the creature?"

"Potter?" Flint raised an eyebrow, "Didn't you already ask that?"

Nodding, Harry clarified, "We have to do so now, without giving it away that we're looking. I'll understand if you don't want to help, I don't exactly have anything to repay you with, but I need to know."

"I'll help, Potter," Malfoy nodded, "Our House's reputation is in bad enough shape that we can't afford for this to sink us."

The nodding from the Second Years helped Harry feel better. He was still writing out that list later, but he at least had something to put on the positive side, other than, 'it gets me away from the Dursleys.'

The discussion of what the Slytherins were going to do concerning the Parseltongue incident lasted for at least another hour. At about the time the First Years started nodding off, the Prefects began shuffling everyone towards their year's dorm room.

Reaching the room he shared with Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, and Zabini, Harry tried to tiptoe around them, in case they were more scared than they dared let on in the Common Room proper.

"Potter, relax," Crabbe smirked, "Goyle and I saw your face when you yelled at the snake. There wasn't any anger or disgust, so we're pretty sure you were trying to help."

"It's not our fault no one will believe us," Goyle shrugged.

Tossing himself onto his bed in his pajamas, Nott leaned back and stated, "How many others, outside of our House, do you think you could rely on?"

"Fred, George, and maybe Longbottom." Harry flopped onto his own mattress. "Granger might be dependable, but I don't want to have to."

"Good idea," Zabini smiled, "Well, then we'll do what we can, but none of us can do anything when all we want is to sleep."

I'm not saying Harry will or won't go Dark, but he certainly feels that whatever his decision, he needs the power to back it up. I'm sorry if anyone dislikes my passwords to Slytherin's CR. I'd like to think that even if all the spells are Latin-derived, passwords don't have to be, and Spanish works just as well as any to me, as a mysterious other language for a password.

Speaking of other languages, please forgive the misuse? Of Pig Latin. I don't have the skill Rowling does with her 'Pesky Pixy Pesternome' spell.

I re-read my outline and realized that the first way I had decided to deal with the Serpent spell was rather Gryffindorish of Harry, as he was to have 'Accio-ed' the snake to him, gripped it under its hood, and then spoken to the professor asking about what he had to say—that was actually what the snake said.

#### OUTTAKE:

"Professor, you know how I told you that I heard hissing, and then speaking, right before the first attack?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Mister Potter. What are you trying to lead up to?" Professor Snape never looked up from grading papers.

"Well, I got to thinking, that if I'm a Parselmouth, and I heard hissing, and then someone talking, maybe it's a snake of some kind I overheard?" Harry tried to dance around the topic, hoping not to be verbally blasted into next week.

"There's more to that, Mister Potter, I am sure, so you may as well continue," Snape still wasn't looking up.

"Well, the only snakes I know of that can petrify are Gorgons, but they have human heads too," shrugging, the brunet child added, "Not to mention, Gorgons are native to Greece and rarely leave."

"Mister Potter, will you get to your point?" Snape finally snapped his gaze to the green-eyed boy's direction.

"The only other reptile I have ever heard of that can cause stoning is a Basilisk," Harry grinned.

"That's not your real reasoning for this conclusion, is it?" Snape grumbled.

"No sir, but this one sounds more logical." Shrugging, Harry pushed forward. "After all, I can only say that when you think that the Chamber of Secrets has to have a snake because people mime telling secrets by whispering in hisses, it doesn't make much sense. Does it?"

The cauldron suddenly flying at his head told Harry that the Head of his House was not amused.

END OUTTAKE:

Heheh, I thought that up in the shower one day, and had to put it somewhere. I honestly had the thought pop up, 'hm... Chamber of Secrets... Secrets are mimed with hissing... Snakes hiss... Ah, HA! And then giggled myself silly from there. Or maybe it's giggled myself sillier?

This is posted a day early because next week's could be a day late. Happy Holidays, and hope I don't scare you all off!

"Look, Potter, we'll admit it was rather cunning of you to talk your associate into charming the Bludger to hit you, so you'd have an alibi during the next attack you had them carry out, but now we're on to you." Ron's statement a bare week after the Dueling club fiasco was the final straw.

"Look, Weasel," Harry was hissing, standing among a handful of the Slytherin Second Years. He was so angry, he didn't care about the fury on the redhead's face, or the censure on Granger's. Crabbe and Goyle looked to Malfoy, who nodded, and they stepped closer to the furious brunet, "Don't you think that whoever's behind something like this would go out of their way to not get caught anywhere near the scene? I was there when Mrs. Norris was found!"

"That just means you were shocked by how efficient your pet was," a Ravenclaw spat, "We all know that you Slytherins hate non-Purebloods!"

"What part of that makes any sense!" Harry all but shrieked, "I'm a Half-Blood! Why would I attack those of less than pure family trees when my own is, and I quote, 'tainted?' Personally, I think you're all looking for a scapegoat, and want to bury your heads into the sand to avoid having to think that it might be someone else, who's had the foresight or exceptional luck to pin it on me!"

"You have to admit though, Potter, that you're acting mighty suspicious, ensuring that you're never alone in the halls and all," Finch-Fletchley waved a dismissive hand towards the other Slytherins crowded close.

Hissing, Harry glared furiously. He couldn't make a single sound, his throat had locked up, and catching his breath was a bit of a challenge. He was about to yell at the top of his lungs when Malfoy slipped into the conversation, "Actually, Fletchley, our Head of House suggested we make sure everyone can see he's not alone, so they know someone's been with him at all times. That way, if and when another attack occurs, we can speak up, proving where he's been, and that won't have been wherever the attacker is."

With a snort, Ron countered, "You snakes would vouch for him regardless, what's the point?"

"I actually walk around with Potter all the time because I think one of you Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, or Hufflepuffs, will gather a group together and trap him somewhere. You'll then either lock him in place or beat him bloody," Flint had stalked to the clogged corridor where the Slytherins passed the other three Houses on their way to Transfiguration with the Gryffindors for the day. He was accompanied by the Seventh Year Prefects, who glared at the conglomeration of students viciously.

Disheartened by someone else reaching the same conclusion as him, Harry tried even harder to pull his anger under control. He looked up, finally, and saw more than a few frightened gazes directed at him, and snapped, "What? Never seen someone try to control their temper before?"

"Potter, your hair looked like it had a serious case of static for a couple minutes there," Thomas gasped, "Then it sank back down."

"If you lot don't clear the hallway by the count of three, I'll subtract five points for each individual in the way," the female Prefect stated ominously.

Luckily for the other two Houses, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw got out of the way. Since the next class was with Gryffindor, there was only so much they could do.

"Move on, move on, you have class, same as us," the male Prefect waved the Second Years on.

"I'm going to bring this up to Professor Snape, Potter," Flint pointed out, "They're harassing you, and it has to stop. Slytherin knows, if they thought one of us was harassing them, they'd run to their Head and whine."

Grumbling under his breath, Harry resigned himself to having the Potions Master require a conversation concerning the matter. He

didn't dwell on it much, though, since he was pushed, gently, towards the Transfiguration classroom.

In the classroom itself, the Houses clumped worse than usual. At least, the usual pattern from before the Dueling Club afternoon. Harry was surrounded on all sides by fellow wearers of the green and silver badge. He pulled his essay out of his bag and readied it to turn in to McGonagall.

Speaking of whom, the Gryffindor Head of House slipped in to the room, and hissed at her House, "I should think you would have better things to do than to harass other students. If I'm incorrect in this understanding, by all means, inform me, and I shall endeavor to assign more work for you. I'll even discuss it with the other Professors, who, I'm sure will be glad to add to your workload as well. Do you understand me? I wouldn't normally bring this up in front of any other House, but as you're targeting the members of the other House in the room, I think it is their right to know that there will be consequences for your actions. Conversely," she turned to the other side of the room, "should I find your House harassing any other, I will see that the same is visited upon you? Is that clear?"

Nearly as one, the Slytherins nodded. A tight smile appeared on McGonagall's face, and it slipped away as she returned to face her House. She turned to the front of the room, and stalked to her desk. Reaching it, she opened the text on top, and spoke again, "We were finishing the Transfiguration of stone objects into other materials. As always, if you had not finished the task by the end of the last class, you may complete it now, for a percentage of the points. Those of you who had managed, you will be focusing, for now, on transfiguring the stones into a variety of materials." With a flourish of her wand, a list of materials appeared on the board behind her, "Start with these as examples, and should you manage to complete this list before everyone has finished the base of the assignment, I shall find another task for you. At this time, turn in your essays."

From there, the class was fairly quiet. Students were either changing stones into wood, or into other materials. When the last student accomplished the task, McGonagall called the attention of the class

back to herself. Harry peered up from where he was finishing his fifth of seven material Transfigures, and listened raptly.

"I won't insult your intelligence by trying to convince you that it is coincidence that many of your classes are dealing with spells such as this. Charms to counter stoning, Potions to prevent paralysis, Transfiguring stone. You all should know that we are fully committed to catching the perpetrator of these attacks, and you all do know that the attacks have resulted in a series of petrified individuals. I tell you this, to encourage you all to learn these skills, and to help you avoid the same fate as has befallen one of your classmates." McGonagall spoke. "Thus, your next assignment is to Transfigure larger stone objects into other materials, starting with wood. It shouldn't be much more difficult than the first stones. Therefore, I feel you all should be able to complete it by the end of class."

Harry applied himself to the task, secretly relieved. He'd actually been practicing this very task between classes. He didn't figure that he'd ever be skilled enough to undo the curse on the stoned cat, kid and ghost, but as long as he worked toward a goal, what did he have to complain about?

McGonagall's prediction more or less came true. She called an end to the class just as Crabbe and Goyle managed to get their wood block to stop clinking on their desks like stones would. Longbottom and Ron were just finishing getting their blocks to have wood grain instead of stone specks.

The class diverged quickly, and Harry tried to head off to the library for some research. At first, the others balked, but a Fifth Year Slytherin approached and offered to go with him. Figuring he had plenty of time between that class and Supper, Harry was hoping to get more information on custodial rules in the Wizarding world. He'd managed to get proof that showed Dumbledore had no business holding his key, or giving it out to others, unless the man was his Wizarding guardian. He'd also gotten documentation that showed that if his parents had declared a guardian for him in their wills, that was to be the primary source from which guardians were appointed, and detailed the consequences of someone dodging the situation. He was still trying to find something that told him for sure whether or not he'd

have a say in picking his guardian should the one his parents had chosen be unavailable. Not to mention, he wanted something to guarantee that Dumbledore couldn't just step in and make the choices he wanted to and force them to stick.

After a couple hours of researching, Harry was just that little bit closer to being able to pick his own guardian. He rewrote the phrase indicating that only a declared guardian may influence the appointment of another guardian unto a child.

A loudish noise at the entrance of the library startled the Second Year, and the Fifth year Slytherin at the next table jumped too. Both boys joined Madam Pince in glaring at the door as it opened, and in turn, the person issued from the other side of it. The wide-eyed look on Professor McGonagall's face told Harry all he needed to know, but he still let her relate her news.

"Mister Potter, there's been another attack. Please tell me you've been here in the library from the end of class," she gasped.

"Aside from the argument about whether or not I should come here to the library, yes ma'am," Harry blinked.

"Madam Pince, will you vouch for this?" the Transfiguration professor turned to the Librarian.

"Those two boys have been in here for the last three-and-a-half hours, just studying," Pince clucked, "Sufficiently quiet even, they've been."

The sigh of relief that the Gryffindor Head of House issued warmed Harry just that touch that could feel past the horror of another person turned to stone. Then his temperature dropped again as he wondered whom it was.

"I have to warn you, Mister Potter, that the school's view of you, in general, has only worsened," the Transfiguration Professor led the Fifth and Second Years to the Great Hall, where the rest of the school was gathered.

The dull roaring of the students increased in volume when the trio arrived. Harry could hear a voice or two say, 'I knew she'd find him!' The vindictive glee in their voices gave him the impression that he'd been tried and found guilty in their minds, and it was only a matter of execution in their view.

Leading the two boys to the Slytherin gathering, and then nodding to Professor Snape, who relaxed a hair, not that anyone other than the Headmaster would notice. She then turned to the whole school and called out, "It has been shown that aside from the time it takes to travel from the Transfiguration classroom and the library, Mister Potter has been in the latter location, and therefore cannot be held responsible for the attack."

Through her announcement, the students shuffled their feet and either glared or acted as though they wanted to hide. In either case, it was safe to guess that they paid no attention. In fact, Harry was so not surprised at this that he didn't even blink when faces turned back to him, teeth bared, grimaces made, and hissing said. He had to bite his lip when he heard some of the students hissing. As that was all he could make of it, he found it ironic. After all, they were mocking him for resembling Slytherin, and they were acting like the snakes they wanted to associate him with.

The Headmaster took over the proceedings, "As we are all quite unsettled, I presume you all will appreciate that classes have been cancelled for the rest of the day. What you might not enjoy as much, is that you will all be remanded to your Common Rooms, at the least, for the rest of the night."

Though he wasn't sure whether he was happy or disappointed, Harry followed the Prefects and Professor Snape to the dungeons. He'd gotten out of Astronomy that night, but had also lost the chance to continue researching for his papers. That didn't even cover the fact that he'd found a book on highly dangerous magical creatures, and was about to start reading it when Professor McGonagall had shown up. He supposed it was lucky that he'd checked it out, while the one he'd been summarizing from at the time had been one he couldn't.

After arriving in the Slytherin rooms, the students clustered together, and the older ones crowded around Harry's guard for the time he was in the library. Not entirely sure he heard right, Harry was still more than a little depressed by the thought that they were asking the older boy if he was sure the Second Year hadn't slipped away under an illusion, and returned.

Dryly, the older boy spoke, "Aren't we all doomed if Potter did slip away from under an illusion and is the Heir?"

"Elders, don't even joke about that, we can't guarantee that the other Houses won't come up with that as an excuse to all but string Potter up," the female Seventh Year Prefect spat.

"They're already determined to string me up, so what's the difference? It's just like at the Dursley's. Tell a little story and I'm tried, convicted and ready to be sentenced before I get a word in edgewise," Harry grumbled, "Tell me again why I bother with it all?"

"Potter!" Parkinson gasped, "We are not just like the Muggles!"

"How many of you aren't sure I didn't do it?" Harry looked around the room, noticing the edgy glances to the side. "I rest my case."

"Give us proof, Potter," a Sixth Year spoke up.

"Why should I have to prove my innocence? Shouldn't you all have to prove my guilt beyond a doubt? I don't understand why being in the wrong place at the wrong time gets me pegged as a vicious person. Especially not when you're all telling me you grew up to stories about how I 'defeated the Dark Lord as a baby!' It just doesn't make sense!" Harry found himself yelling at the end of his speech.

"Mister Potter, this should teach you that celebrity is quite fickle," Snape had entered the Common Room, and took control of the conversation. "One moment a man is the most popular individual in the area. The next day, however, one of his neighbors decides they had been wronged, so they spread the story about, which results in the ruin of the first man's reputation, and perhaps even the ruination of his life."

"So who could I have ticked off enough to result in siccing a creature on people, and claiming that it had been done by the Heir of Slytherin?" the Second Year peered up at his Head of House.

"There is the possibility that your framing for the crime is merely, to them, a fortuitous accident." Professor Snape suggested.

"Augh!" Harry grumbled into the hands he brought to his forehead.

"Professor, how do we go about proving Potter didn't do it?" Parkinson piped up, "Even if he feels he shouldn't have to, we know we do."

"At this point, pessimistic as I may seem, I think it's no longer possible." Snape took a deep breath, "they are beyond thinking logically, sadly even the Ravenclaws."

"I think it's quite ironic that this would occur the year that Potter decides to show all of us just what Muggles are like in his experience," Derrick raised an eyebrow, "Does anyone else suspect he's been targeted for that reason?"

A few nods helped to calm the Second Year down, and a hand on his shoulder did a good deal to finishing the task. Looking up, Harry met the Potions Master's eyes and remembered his research in the library. Blinking, Harry wondered why he'd remember that all of a sudden, and then wrinkled his nose at his Head of House.

The smirk on the adult's face told him he was on to something, but that he'd get no clues in that regard, "Mister Potter, I'm willing to listen to the progress you've made regarding custody of children with feet in both the Magical and the Muggle worlds."

A chuckle from Elders caused Harry to glance back quickly, "That one seems obsessed. He looks up every book that even mentions custody, and won't let anyone help."

"I thought you were to keep an eye on him," the female Seventh Year Prefect smirked, "Therefore you helping him to research would be counter-productive to your goal. Wouldn't it?"

Sheepishly, the other boy nodded. Harry followed the gentle tug on his sleeve to Snape's office. Inside, the boy sat down in what he was starting to mentally call his chair, and waited.

"The Headmaster wanted me to inform you that from now on, outside of classes, you are either to be in the Common Room, escorted by a Prefect, or in a Professor's office, in case you have a detention to serve. He feels this would be the best way to alleviate the suspicions of the rest of the school." Snape's voice alone told Harry that the man didn't believe the line he'd been fed.

"Sir, the others told me that the Chamber had been opened before, roughly fifty years or so ago," Harry hesitated, "How did they solve the mystery then?"

"They didn't. A student reported another student as the perpetrator, and the second student was expelled and put in Azkaban for a period." Leaning forward in his chair Snape snapped, "You aren't still researching the creature, are you? I warned you not to."

"I'm sorry, but I am still trying to figure out what's doing this. I've got to, sir, or I'll never know what's being used to frame me so thoroughly." Harry rubbed at his scar, head hurting once again. "But what I don't get is, Slytherin's Heir, how do they know who it is?"

"No one really does, Mister Potter," exasperated, the man stood, "They just suspect people with traits that Slytherin was said to have. Parseltongue for example."

"Oh," Harry stood as well, and allowed himself to be led back to the Common Room.

"Since you will anyway, go ahead and use that book you borrowed from the library to add to your information sources," Snape shook his head and rubbed a finger along his generously sized nose.

"Thank you sir, I'll be sure to report to you if I have any suspicions on what it is," Harry blinked, "If you grown ups don't already know, that is."

The man chuckled lowly as he closed the door with himself on one side, and his Slytherins on the other. Harry looked into the Common Room, and shrugged.

"Potter, don't you know that shrugging and rolling your eyes are signs of bad breeding?" Malfoy drawled.

"No, I was just raised by Muggles who hated me, Malfoy, not nobility, that's all," Harry hissed back, reached for his bag, and pulled out the tome on magical creatures.

"Potter, it'd be better if you waited until morning to read that book, it's dry as dirt," a Sixth Year suggested.

"Start now, start later, it doesn't really matter, I'll still read the thing. The time just indicates how much more or less time I'll have to understand what I find by the next attack," Harry returned.

"I've already gone through that thing with a handful of search spells," a Seventh Year girl grumbled, "Found that the only creatures with the ability to turn a ghost into stone would kill a human outright."

"There's got to be more information than what we currently have," another Seventh Year muttered, tapping his chin, "After all, we certainly aren't the only ones looking for information."

"We should probably write out a list of all the things we're sure we know, one for every speculation, and one for all the wild guesses," Harry nodded at the Fifth Year's suggestion.

"Okay, that means its time to get some sleep, people, so disperse. Tomorrow we'll start our lists, and if we need to, we'll give copies to our Head of House. Until then, we should just sleep on what we know." The female Seventh Year Prefect bossed the rest of the House into their respective sleeping quarters.

Readyng for bed, Harry remembered what the Potions Master had mentioned about people presuming Parseltongue had something to do with the problem. He made a mental note to look into any creatures that were reptilian in nature that could turn things to stone. He then promptly fell asleep.

For the rest of the week, Harry tried to talk any of the Prefects into letting him go to the library, but they weren't budging. He used the leverage of studying for tests, and they just gave him indulgent looks. His next salvo was the subject of his custody, and they just went to the archives themselves and returned with tomes for him to pore through, while keeping him in the Common Room or in classes. After that failed, he tried the vantage of finding out what the creature was, and that appeared to be the final straw.

"Potter, we're trying to keep you from being lynched, plain and simple." The female Fifth Year Prefect, by the name of Adrianna Landale, sighed, "If we let you out of the classrooms with less than an entourage, the Gryffindors are set to yank you to a dark corner and beat a confession out of you."

"But I didn't do it!" Harry wailed.

"That won't stop them," she sighed.

Sputtering, the boy had no more to contribute, but she apparently wasn't done. Speaking over his attempts, Landale continued, "They'd know you were without a full contingent of guards because the Ravenclaws are watching out. The Hufflepuffs won't even try to pretend they aren't begging for vengeance, though they're calling it justice, and the Gryffindors are all swearing to be the tools with which it will be executed. Barring a select few, of course."

"Lovegood, Longbottom, Granger, Seelie, the twins and the youngest Weasley seem to believe you're innocent. And the only reason most of them feel comfortable speaking up is that, aside from Granger, they're all either outcasts from their Houses in the first place, or Weasleys," Flint added.

"So stay put, Potter," Bole winced, "We might even be able to talk Professor Snape into letting us have a Quidditch practice."

Harry figured, with that, that he was as good as under House arrest, and grumbled under his breath about how this whole problem had better get solved quick, he was tired of his life being as arrested as the petrified students'.

"If you're so determined, how much progress have you made?" Malfoy blinked.

"Almost none. That book I got the day Finch-Fletchley was attacked only vaguely mentioned that there were creatures which could turn others into statues, suggesting that the majority of them came from the Greek isles, like the Gorgons and Circe, just like I was warned." Harry sighed. "The only other creatures I've been able to find are either not going to be here due to climate, or they'd have to have a colony of them somewhere in the school. If we could just figure out how it's getting around Hogwarts we'd have a better idea of what we're dealing with!"

"I'm actually starting to wonder if someone hasn't checked out the pertinent books," Landale suggested, "I seem to remember writing about other creatures that could cause paralysis, petrifaction or death with their gaze." She stalked off to her room for her notes.

"While we're waiting then, why don't we list what we do know?" the male Sixth Year Prefect suggested, pulling sheets of parchment, quills and a couple of ink jars out of his bag.

"It seems to be controlled," Parkinson pointed out, "Because if it was acting entirely on its own, Harry wouldn't even be a suspect, I think."

"Chances are they'd still try to pin it on him, but that's a good point," Landale returned, holding notes.

"What else?" the Sixth year prompted.

"We know the Heir isn't in Slytherin," Malfoy bragged.

"No we don't," Landale shook her head, "We just highly doubt that they are. After all, we're all of a mind that Slytherin doesn't need any more bad press, but that doesn't mean that someone in our House doesn't care."

"We need something we know, not more than we suspect, or surmise," the oldest male in the room prodded.

"I heard Longbottom talking about the Mandrakes being earmarked for the potions to restore the victims, and that they should be ready by mid spring," Crabbe pointed out.

"Okay, there's a fact, and it gives us a timeline," Landale pointed, "Chances are our attacker is either going to get the school shut down before that deadline or will try to accomplish what they're out to do by then."

"Like getting Potter expelled?" Malfoy raised an eyebrow.

"That's more speculation," the male Prefect waved his quill in Malfoy's direction, "but like the rest, it seems based on facts."

"I think I heard that Hagrid's been trying to hunt foxes in the Forest," Zabini tossed his head, "Something about his chickens being killed."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Landale yelped.

"Hey you wanted facts, it's a fact," Zabini defended himself.

"I asked Professor Snape how they solved the mystery of the Heir last time this happened, but he said they didn't. He said that one student turned another in, and the latter was expelled." Harry bit his lip, "He was careful not to name names, though, so I'm not sure when or who was involved."

"The when is simple enough to answer," Landale grinned, "The last time the Chamber of Secrets was opened was about fifty years ago. The who will just take a little research, so that gives us a lead, right, Wells?"

"So we look up who turned in the Heir fifty years ago," the boy muttered, then paused.

"So if we know who the Heir was, won't we know what the creature is?" Bole asked.

"It could be a completely new creature," Landale argued, "Seeing as very few of the really dangerous creatures have long life spans. Sometimes it's due to hunting, but most often their own toxins kill them, having eaten away at what contains the toxic elements."

"We could research in one of three directions," Wells pointed out, "We could look for creatures that might have been able to be alive during the Founders' time, creatures that might only have been alive during the last rising of the Heir, or creatures that could have been just brought in for this rising of the Heir."

"Phoenixes are nigh on immortal," Landale pointed out, "But I highly doubt that the Headmaster's wouldn't have noticed another phoenix in the castle. Not to mention it attacking students."

"And that's completely ignoring that phoenixes can't petrify," Bole snickered, "I'm not sure they can do anything that counts as offensive, even."

"I'm sure they can," Harry laughed, "After all, while flame is beautiful to look at and perfect for warming a person up, it's still quite deadly if you are caught in it, and will damage your eyes if you stare too long into it."

The older students froze, and looked at the Second Year. Harry noticed that he'd caught everyone's attention with that statement and blinked, "What? I read it in the same text that helped me to figure out what the Professors were guarding last year!"

"I thought your memories were patchy for last year," Wells drawled.

"They w- wait," Harry paused, and stared at his toes, though he wasn't actually seeing them. He remembered not remembering the last parts of his First Year, but now he also recalled reading a book,

looking for what might have been pulled from a vault, and suddenly jumping to his feet, happily. As his memory-self reached the table where the twins sat, he remembered what it had been he'd just found.

Taking a deep, slow breath, Harry tried to remember something else, and found himself to be unhappily remembering that Quirrell had chosen him to educate the other students on the use of spells for the entire year. And that the Headmaster hadn't stepped in, saying it would build character. As the brunet got angry, he wondered what had finally broken through the block.

"Potter?" Landale gingerly placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, her light brown eyes filled with concern.

"I can actually see Quirrell's face in my memories now, and how he did the same thing last year as what Lockhart's doing this time," Harry grumbled.

"Progress on your memories at least," Wells sighed, "I think we should call it quits for now on the listing things we know. We're only showing how little we actually do know."

Agreeing, Landale and Bole packed away their supplies, and the Second Years in the room began packing away their belongings as well. Harry was trying to figure out how to get himself out of the Common Room when the Head of the House stalked through.

Glaring silently for a few seconds, Professor Snape looked at each student and held out a list. "Those of you who have attended more than one year here will recognize the intent of this list. I am taking down the names of those who will remain for the winter break." As he passed Harry, the boy thought he heard 'Your name's already on the list, Potter, it will be safer,' and shrugged.

As the circuit around the room was completed, the Potions Master passed the dark-haired boy again, and tilted the list towards the Second Year's view. As the only name visible, Harry couldn't help but recognize that it was the signature he'd provided at the beginning of term. Nodding his thanks, Harry didn't argue with his Housemates

any longer over getting outside of the Common Room. They seemed relieved, for their parts.

"Professor, for his safety, is there any way you could talk the Headmaster into letting one of us take Potter home with us?" Parkinson spoke up just before the man left the room, "After all, without us here, he'd be all alone to deal with the machinations of the other Houses, most of which we're sure would love to tie him up by his toenails."

"I've asked the Headmaster if it's safest to keep Mister Potter here," Snape's expression gave little away, besides exasperation, "and he feels that if the boy isn't at Hogwarts, the only other place he's safe at is back with his relatives. He won't hear of sending your classmate anywhere else, as it wouldn't be safe enough."

"Why does he want to keep me safe?" Harry asked, "I'm only asking because this seems to predate the petrifying and whatever-ing that's going on."

"You would be better off asking the Headmaster yourself for the answer to that, Mister Potter. I will not contemplate the possibilities, myself," Professor Snape drawled, and then stalked out of the room, taking his chance as it was delivered to him.

"So, Potter's stuck here, with who knows how many Gryffindors, and the Heir, all out to get him. The Ravenclaws will help the Gryffs, and the Hufflepuffs won't stand up to anyone to say no to what'll happen," Flint grumbled.

"Derrick covered last year's shift," Bole indicated, "So he should get this year off, I'd offer, but I'm staying to study for OWLs."

As he heard the discussion that followed, there were al awful lot of them 'staying for OWLs' or NEWTs, and even Malfoy said he was staying, though he blamed it on his father feeling, dangerous as it was, it was better at the school than at the Manor. Apparently, there was some serious remodeling going on.

Harry looked around the room, and noticed the smirks on the faces of several students. He'd only been allowed to actually look at one name on the list, so he was beginning to suspect that the rest of his House was fabricating reasons to stay at Hogwarts for the break. He really didn't want to think about the possibility of the list being long because they were all worried about him.

Sighing, the brunet decided it was probably better if he didn't ask. That way the guilt wouldn't pile up on him any earlier than it had to. Something in the back of his mind tickled painfully at the thought of Quirrell, though. He wasn't quite sure, but he knew his head had always hurt during class. If he could just remember what had caused it, he might be able to solve the mystery of why he couldn't remember the very end of the previous year at all.

Giving up for the night on homework and leaving the Common Room, Harry headed for the Second Years' rooms and called it a night.

I'm going to meddle with the Quidditch schedule, and say that three of the games for the year would take place before the winter break. Beyond that, I'm still a little fuzzy. I'm also aware that I've got an awful lot of attacks happening before winter break, but I'm also hoping to solve the sneaky, er riddle, earlier. So much for alliteration. Heh.

I swear, I've researched creatures that petrify and I have to wonder how in the world it was so difficult to figure out when I read the books the very first time! There are only three creatures I could find in all of mythology that do, but feel free to tell me more if you know them!

This was originally going to be two chapters, but they both felt short, so I combined them. In an aside, please don't string me up for the way the other Houses are reacting! Please?

Curled up in his warm blankets, Harry knew he had to get up at some point. The problem was, it was cold outside his little nest, and he was cozy inside of it. Not to mention, it wasn't like he had classes to go to. Added to that, with the rest of the Houses still obsessed with getting 'justice' against him, and it made for the perfect recipe for Harry Staying Put.

The older Slytherins had kept up as best they could, with the research for what might be petrifying students, Mrs. Norris, and the Gryffindor ghost. Harry cut them slack because the Fifth and Seventh years had studying for their standardized tests to do, and thus a lot of books were checked out that the Sixth years couldn't get their hands on. Sometimes, though, everyone in the House joked about how the Ravenclaws were so set on their scapegoat being Potter, that they'd checked out all the books that might result in identifying who it really was, or at least the creature they were using to attack people with.

Having so much more time in the Common Room, Harry had more or less gotten his assignments done and was even making progress on the independent studies. He was working on his third or fourth version of the Transfiguration essay, with help from Landale and Wells especially. His Charms essay though, was about as completed as it was going to get. He'd hand it in if he weren't worried about Flitwick getting too nervous to take it from him.

He'd also had plenty of chances to work on the issue of his custody. Without directly asking, he couldn't know who his guardian was, but he had all the information he needed to get the Headmaster into a lot of trouble should it be anyone else. It was all compiled and he had even rewritten those notes a few times, nearly turning them into an essay of their own. During one of the revisions, he'd dug through his trunk for notes he'd taken during the summer, and was faced with the sheet of parchment that claimed it was a will of the Marauders.

He'd pondered that one for a while, and came to the conclusion that for the will to have been in his Trust Vault, he was supposed to have found it. Therefore, one of his parents had had something to do with the Marauders, or at least had been a trusted friend of one of the quartet. Sadly, Harry couldn't quite figure out how to read it. He'd tried swearing he was up to no good, but all that got was an 'Obviously' in

the distinctive handwriting of Mister Prongs. And 'Mischief Managed,' received a 'Hardly,' from Padfoot, at which point, Harry had snapped, "Stupid piece of paper, what kind of will are you when no one can read you?"

He'd nearly jumped out of his skin when Mister Moony's loopy, yet tidy writing answered with, 'That just means that at least one of us is still alive. It's not a proper will to be read when not all of us have died, now is it?' From there, Harry had more or less given up on finding anything more out. He'd wanted to ask either of the Marauders' papers how the will had anything to do with the Potter Vaults, but didn't quite have the nerve. Not to mention, he hadn't been anywhere near Headquarters.

Pondering all of this in his state of half-asleep, Harry was actually on the verge of rolling over and returning to the land of Nod, when a clanging noise caused him to jump upright, and shoot the Prefect a foul glare.

"Yeah, yeah, Potter, take lessons from Professor Snape, and then I might get nervous." The Prefect joked, "I'm here to wake you lot up, because we finally got permission to take Potter to the library. Apparently most of the parents of Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs feel it's not safe for their pwecious widdle ones."

Suddenly having an actual reason to get up, Harry wasted no time racing to get washed up and dressed. He champed at the bit, so to speak, when he had to wait for the rest of his yearmates to get ready as well, but never said a word. After all, this privilege could too easily be taken away again.

Finally, when everyone was standing in the Common Room, the Prefects all felt comfortable leading the Second, Third, and Fourth Years to the library. While the majority of the other Houses had left, there were still substantial numbers of students in the school. Their grumbles were heard by the group from the dungeons and Harry had to wonder, thought he kept it to himself, how long it would take before something happened that would make them all pretend to love him again.

In the library, Harry was pushed to a table, and surrounded by Fourth Years. A few minutes' search revealed that the books that had been missing before the term ended were still checked out. Hearing that, Landale decided to make a formal complaint to Madam Pince, saying 'they're checking and rechecking the books just so we can't study from them, and if our grades suffer due to that, there are legal consequences that they'll suffer!'

While he was taking yet more notes concerning the care of a rather nocturnal plant Professor Sprout had decided to have them care for instead of the Mandrakes, he overheard a conversation on the other side of the shelves.

"Are you sure Hagrid was talking about his roosters?" the voice might have been Granger's, but Harry wasn't going to ask to be sure.

"Yes, Hermione, he was talking about his roosters," Longbottom's voice was unmistakable however, "He's really stymied about what's gotten into their pens and slaughtered them. After all, no one in the school hears them crow in the mornings."

"Roosters aren't limited to crowing in the mornings, Neville, they crow whenever they like," Granger corrected.

"But why would someone kill them? I mean, they can't be heard in the castle, so it's not like they're bothering anyone," Ron grumbled, "Unless Potter's sending his creature after them just to hone its killing skills."

Harry bit back a growl at that comment, and was quite happy in the next instant that he had, as a yelp from the loudmouthed redhead spoke of someone else disagreeing with him.

"What was that for, Fred!" the youngest male Weasley spat.

"Do you have proof that Harry did it?" the twin growled back.

"If not, then don't make accusations. In case you have forgotten," the other twin chipped in to the argument.

"Mother doesn't like it when her children fight, and she did adopt Harry last year," Harry felt like cheering, or at least dashing up to the twins and shaking their hands.

"Not to mention that if he proves innocent, like he IS," at this, Harry noticed that the Fourth Years were smirking along with him.

"He could look up the laws on slander and sue you personally for defamation of character," the statement was met with a blank look from the unintentional eavesdropper, which quickly shifted to one of shock, as a Fourth Year slid a book in front of him, open to just that topic.

"So hush up already, Ronald," Harry nearly fell out of his chair as he tried not to laugh. He was starting to suspect that the twins had more or less set their younger brother up for this discussion. If that was the case, then Harry really was glad for the trinkets he had managed to get other Slytherins to pick up for him, in exchange for research notes.

As the Gryffindor argument wound down, a Sixth Year sauntered over to the table, walking alongside of Landale. As they arrived, the female Prefect spoke, "Apparently a SECOND Year has checked out the books that include creatures that petrify other beings, and as she's a Gryffindor, and gotten special dispensation from the Headmaster, there's nothing we can do. So this trip was pretty much a waste of time."

"Not exactly," Harry turned his head to one side, "I overheard something that doesn't make much sense, but it ties to what Zabini mentioned."

"Oh?" Landale drawled.

"Yeah, it's roosters being killed, not chickens," Harry added, "So we might have someone slaughtering them to protect some secret or another."

"Good, we can use that," she nodded, then stood by Harry's chair, "Okay Potter, lets get you back to the Common Room."

Standing and gathering his notes, asking if he could borrow the book the Fourth Year had pushed at him, Harry moved to follow the Prefect out of the library. He really hadn't meant to pause, but when he overheard another conversation, he couldn't help it. It made even less sense to him, but it was odd enough to catch his attention.

"So they couldn't even see what Creevey had taken a photograph of?" the female voice was a little on the muffled side.

"Nope," the other involved in the discussion wasn't immediately apparent as male or female, "Creevy's camera was still intact, but the film had burnt out."

"Like it had been exposed?" the girl asked.

"No, like it had been lit on fire from inside of the camera," the other pointed out.

"Do Magic cameras do that?" the girl was obviously confused.

"No, but there are, I think, creatures and spells that can, so we can only assume that Potter knows them," the other was dismissing the topic.

"You sure, aren't most of those kinds of spells really difficult? I thought Potter was only a Second Year, so he wouldn't know anything much past that." The girl challenged.

"He works with the Weasley twins, so he's further advanced than you'd think." Harry was finally able to identify the second voice as male, and he was sadly convinced that this male was in Slytherin. It sounded an awful lot like-

"POTTER!" Landale yelped, "What are you doing staring off into space! You had better have been remembering things from last year, or I'll yank your ear off into next WEEK!"

Yipping, Harry rushed to follow the outraged Prefect and knew he'd been caught by the two gossips. He could only hope that the older boy didn't decide to leave him out to get caught and punished by the

other three Houses, just because Harry now knew for sure that there were members of his own House frightened of him.

In the Common Room proper, Harry settled down into a couch in front of the fire and was about to brood. Landale thwacked him lightly on the head and told him to relax, "I wouldn't be surprised if that last conversation was a set up. Someone wanted you to hear that Slytherins doubt you so you'd feel less comfortable with us."

"But it's still true," Harry grumbled.

"Sure you scare us, Potter," She smirked, "but some of the rest of us would scare you if we told you half the things about ourselves that we know about you."

"So much for even exchanges of information," Harry muttered.

Laughing she pointed out, "You freely shared this information, without first asking for a return. Its not our fault."

"You guys make it harder than it has to be," Harry rubbed his forehead, "I mean, half the reason I don't ask for help from any of you is because I know someone will ask, 'what's in it for us,' and I don't always know what I'll trade off. And don't try to tell me I should leave that decision up to you lot more often, because I don't want to think of what you all would name as prices if I left it up to you!"

"The reason Malfoy's so determined that you not become the leader of Slytherin is that you could," she spoke cryptically, then changed the subject, "So Hagrid's roosters are being killed, and what else did you overhear?"

"Er," Harry blinked, derailed partially by the change of topic. He puzzled over her other statement, then recalled what he'd heard just before Landale dragged him out of the library, "Creevey's camera was full of burnt up film when they found him."

"Was it Muggle or Magic film?" she asked.

"I don't know for sure, but it sounded like it was supposed to be Magic film," Harry shrugged, "that was about the point you returned and yelled at me."

"Ah," she nodded, "Well, we'll look into that. That might even give us more ground to work with."

She left to work on some of her homework after jotting those bits of information into the book the House was using to keep it all in one place. As she worked, Harry was lulled nearly to sleep by the simple scratching of the quill she wrote with, and the rustling of the fire in the grate. He was very nearly asleep, hearing a wide variety of spells being cast, when the door opened briefly, allowing someone into the Common Room

After a while, Harry ventured further into the realm of those dusted by the sand man, and became rather invested in the story of the spells chanted rapidly. There were several voices competing with one another, and after a bit, Harry got the feeling that most of the voices were working together to eliminate or capture the last voice. Sadly, they weren't faring well, and the boy became nervous. It was right as the lone voice spoke the Fetching Spell, that Harry was snapped awake by Crabbe and Goyle lumbering through the door, into the Common Room.

Normally this wouldn't have affected his nap, but something about their walking was off. Not to mention that when they struck up conversation with Malfoy, who Harry realized was also in the Common Room, that he knew something was wrong.

They sounded both too dumb to live, and too smart for their own good. Malfoy apparently noticed something was off as well, and was treating them worse than usual. Finally, Harry sat up all the way in his couch and turned to face Crabbe, Goyle, and Malfoy. He moved fast enough that he thought he saw a great deal of anger in Goyle's face before Crabbe reached over and clobbered Goyle's foot with his own. The resulting yelp left Harry enough time to catch Malfoy's eyes and both nodded.

"I thought you two were headed to the kitchens earlier, to get some snacks," Harry piped up.

"Uh, er," Goyle was focused on glaring at Crabbe, and at the same time rubbing his foot.

"We, uh," Crabbe didn't seem to have any better luck voicing his thoughts.

"You two should know by now that if you're going to the kitchens you have to bring me back a treacle tart smothered in chocolate sauce," Malfoy folded his arms, leaned back and gave off the air of a spoiled brat. More so than usual in Harry's opinion.

"Uh, er," Crabbe stuttered.

"Sure," Goyle stood and yanked on Crabbe's arm. A muttered discussion between them and then Goyle, whose hair was fading from brown, asked, "So when do you think the Heir of Slytherin is going to attack next?"

"We rather wish we knew, Goyle, we might be able to do something about it by then if we did," Malfoy drawled. He then leaned forward and made shooing motions with his hands, "Don't forget, a STRAWberry treacle tart, smothered with chocolate syrup."

As the two rather large Second Years left, in a hurry, Harry thought he saw Goyle's hair turn red. Blinking, he thought he recognized that as a side effect of Polyjuice. "Malfoy, why would Second Years be able to brew Polyjuice?"

"What?" Malfoy blinked. "That's what you think was going on?"

"It was either that or a doozy of a Confusion Charm on Crabbe and Goyle," Harry shook his head, "They were painfully stupid one moment, and the next, they were almost smart enough to be convincing. Not to mention the stuttering. Then, as they left, I could have sworn I saw Goyle's hair turn red."

"Hm," Malfoy tapped his knees as he continued to sit. A few minutes later, the door opened again, and Crabbe and Goyle returned, shaken, stirred, and more than a little red in the face.

To be safe, the two already in the Common Room decided to test them, and Malfoy asked, "Well, where's my chocolate smothered treacle tart? I told you to get me one if you were headed to the kitchens!"

"We don't know where the kitchens are, Malfoy," Crabbe blinked.

"Besides, I thought you hated treacle tarts," Goyle added.

"That just means that Potter was right," Malfoy smirked, "We were invaded."

"We should report it to Professor Snape," Harry suggested, "After all, it was probably a Gryffindor plot."

"What makes you so sure, Potter?" Malfoy asked.

"Who else would have the nerve?" Harry rolled his eyes.

"But, Gryffindors, knowing how to brew Polyjuice?" Malfoy hissed.

"Granger?" Harry smirked back.

"What about her, Mister Potter?" Harry jumped as the man's voice sounded behind him.

"We think she might have helped other Gryffindors brew Polyjuice Potion to impersonate Crabbe and Goyle," Harry pointed at the two disheveled boys.

Looking closely, Snape sighed, "I had wondered where it went, I suppose I shall have to speak to Professor McGonagall about it."

"Sir?" Malfoy looked up at him, puzzled.

"Never you mind," Snape nodded at the four boys, then stalked further into the room, "Mister Potter, it has been mentioned to me that you've overheard interesting things lately?"

"Actually, I did. Or, at least, they were interesting to me," Harry paused. "I heard that Hagrid's roosters were being slaughtered and wondered if that was related to the attacks. I also heard that Creevey's camera had the film burned out of it. As it was possibly Magic film, it might have happened because the magic was sucked out."

Snape's eyes bored into the boy's shoulder, but for once, Harry wasn't going to meet them. He had a feeling that meeting the man's eyes had something to do with remembering odd things at odd moments and wasn't keen on remembering what he'd heard as he half-dreamt. A low noise signaled the adult turning and leaving the Common Room. After his departure, Harry looked up and was about to return to contemplating his half-dream.

"Potter, how do you recognize the effects of Polyjuice so well?" Malfoy asked.

"During my detentions, Professor Snape would have me identify what potions students were supposed to have been making based on what was in the fouled cauldrons, while I cleaned them. He'd explain why I got things wrong, and would further expound on uses for the potions if I got them right. Once, he mentioned that a potion had been just steps away from accidentally being turned into an abbreviated Polyjuice. I looked it up and found the information," Harry shrugged, "It takes a month to brew, so any abbreviated forms are going to have major flaws in them, as those failed potions I cleaned proved or at least supported."

"Do you realize, that at the rate you're going," Malfoy's eyes were wide, "If you wanted, when you graduate Hogwarts, you could apply for Apprenticeship in Potions?"

"Yes, I do," Harry grinned, "I wanted to know why he was teaching me all this last year, and he said that if I soaked up the information, I would not only destroy the concept of Muggle-borns not having a

chance in Potions, but that I might also manage to compete with him for the title of youngest Potions Master certified."

"And you want to?" Crabbe blinked.

"Why not? It's a better goal than simply attending school to pass and maybe do something like becoming an Auror." Harry shrugged once more.

"Are you only going for your Potions Mastery then?" Goyle wondered aloud.

"Actually," Harry was grinning again, "I'm kind of thinking about studying Mediwizardry. This is a fairly recent decision, but, if I can get a Potions Mastery, I can also work on the medical aspects, and knowing Potions as well as that, well, it'd make treating people easier. I'd know which spells would react to which ingredients, and I might even be able to brew up my own concoctions with which to mend people."

"That's an amazingly Hufflepuff way of using Slytherin ambition," Landale had finally finished studying, and overheard the conversation.

"I never said my life's goal was to heal the world of all its pain," Harry snorted, "More like, I see what Madam Pomfrey can do, and I want to be able to do that as well, that way, if I ever do find myself in a situation where someone wants to pummel me into the ground, I can heal myself afterwards. Or maybe I could use my healing knowledge to scare them off. Saying, 'I know fifty-some-odd ways to reverse the healing process. Tick me off, and I'll show you some.' Or something like that."

"Okay, now that's plenty Slytherin for me," the girl was laughing.

"What's it matter if my reasons are Slytherin or Hufflepuff, though?" Harry asked, "I have a goal with which to direct the learning I'm determined to accomplish."

"The hat must have loved you, Potter," Derrick chortled as he walked through the doorway leading into the Common Room, "You're a right bundle of all four Houses, aren't you?"

"I'd rather be balanced," Harry shrugged.

"I don't blame you, really," Landale had stopped laughing by now, and everyone noticed the time, "Okay everyone, it's time for Supper."

Crabbe and Goyle winced. During the meal, it was drawn out of them how they'd been incapacitated, and their year mates couldn't help but chuckle. Sheepishly, they joined in on the merriment after a minute or so.

After getting back to the Common Room, Harry found himself returning to the dream he'd almost had. He had almost put together all of the pieces, and was figuring that the event had lead to Harry learning some secret or another that the Headmaster didn't want a child knowing. The duel, however, sent shivers down the boy's spine, and made him remember that he'd seen the thestrals, and he didn't remember seeing anyone die.

Suddenly, it all clicked into place. The memories disappearing, the thestrals, and Quirrell being replaced by Lockhart. Quirrell had apparently been terribly tempted by whatever the Headmaster had hidden in the school last year, and had tried for it. Harry, Fred, and George must have interfered, and nearly been killed by the man. The Heads of House and Hooch stepped in and dueled him, and then Quirrell must have been killed. It all made sense, and Harry finally relaxed, assuming that his memories had all been restored.

It doesn't seem to me to be much longer before everything falls together for this year's story. It's still going to be longer than I'd plotted, but I figure that's okay, so long as it's not twenty chapters to an outline of ten, right? Oh, and before people get too fired up, I like Hermione, most of the time. I hated the fact that in the books she just HAD to be right. ALL the time. The way I see it, unless you have a photographic memory, it really doesn't matter how much you read, you'll still get something wrong eventually. And even then you might mess something up.

Suffice it to say I'm not writing her as evil, or too terribly rule-bound, but she's very firmly in Dumbledore's court at this point. I'll say that much. When he's told off, things could get interesting, but 'til then, she's going to do as he says.

Classes resumed and Harry was still kept under close watch by the Prefects. He tried not to get frustrated by it, but not being allowed to leave the Common Room was giving him what Muggles called cabin fever, and he was pretty close to hexing Mlafoy the next time the blonde bragged about going outside to see the sun, cold as it was.

With the books he could gather, Harry had mostly finished his Transfiguration assignment and turned it in. McGonagall hadn't finished reading it yet, but the smile on her face had been enough to send the boy hiding in his own mind. He wasn't sure whether it was a good smile or not, but wasn't going to be fool enough to ask either.

His Charms essay, though, was sitting in his trunk, as revised as it was going to get. He couldn't hand it in yet, as Flitwick seemed entirely too nervous. The diminutive man wouldn't even approach Harry's desk any more in class.

This all added to his frustration levels, and had it been earlier in the year, or the year before even, Harry would probably just have snarled at someone violently or whacked them with his foot. When a group of girls dashed into the Common Room giggling wildly, Harry changed his focus on how annoyed he was to never see outside of Slytherin again, and became curious as to why Greengrass, Parkinson and Bulstrode were clustered together. Greengrass spent most of her time by herself, and Bulstrode just didn't get along with Parkinson.

It was when Landale stalked in, holding a soggy, leather-bound book by its corner with the very tips of her fingers that Harry got a clue. He tiptoed in the direction of the girls and worked up the nerve to ask what was going on.

"We're not sure, Potter, but we found this outside the girls' bathroom that's always leaking water in the halls." Parkinson backed up for every step Landale took into the room.

"It's not still dripping, is it?" Harry blinked.

"Oh no, we took care of that before leaving the damp hallway," Landale hissed.

"Filch would murder anyone caught leaving water trails in his precious halls, especially after his cat was," Greengrass piped up, looked at Harry, and yipped, jumping away.

Sighing, Harry rolled his eyes at her antics. That gave him another Slytherin who was sure he was guilty.

"When we picked it up, Moaning Myrtle came zooming out like she always does, and whined about how someone came in and tried to throw it in HER u-bend." Parkinson drawled, though she was still stepping away for every step Landale took.

"Oh quit that, you! It's not dripping, and I'm trying for the fireplace." Landale snapped.

"You probably would just as well throw it out, if it had anything in it, it's useless now," Harry suggested.

"I was going to do one better and burn it," Landale smirked.

"Ah," Harry nodded and settled back to working on the research he'd done for the attacks. With the assistance of older students, he'd found out that the Shinto and Norse sections of magic either had no creatures that could petrify, or the creatures were not worth mentioning in the books available at Hogwarts. That left the Greek and Roman myths with confirmed creatures, though it seemed to him that their effects only affected living beings.

Snapping and popping a couple hours after the girls deposited the ruined book into the fire made the boy jump and look at the flames. To his surprise, the book wasn't ashes and soot; it was still intact. Stepping towards the fire, the boy gingerly pulled one of the pokers from its place, and tugged the book out of the fire. After a bit, when he thought it would have cooled to the touch, Harry picked it up. Taking it back to his chair, he opened it and leafed through it. Noting that it was blank, Harry shrugged and tried the trick that the Marauder's Map used to activate. "Hello?"

Flipping through the pages netted nothing, so he spoke a few more words, and even shook the book up, but received the same results as

before. Sighing and setting it aside, Harry went back to work. On a whim, he left it open. After all, if it was charmed not to burn, it might be useful to use for his notes concerning the creature the new Heir was sending after people. He was finishing notes from the last book Wells had borrowed for him, and was reaching for the ink to finish the sentence when he heard a clink, a chink, and a clatter. He looked and noted that the bottle of ink had bumped into another book, and tipped, then rolled across the book that didn't burn. It stopped there, and the ink pooled. Harry moved quickly to pick up the bottle, as he would still need that ink later, and was amazed to see that the ink was soaking into the book and disappearing.

I knew it was only a matter of time before you returned. Have anything else you want to know?

"Oh my," Harry blinked, then quickly, and carefully dipped the quill into the ink and wrote back, I think you might have mistaken me for someone else.

I do believe I have, I'm sorry, my mistake. Might I ask with whom am I speaking?

Half-nervous and half excited, Harry answered, My name is Harry. And you?

Tom. You wouldn't happen to know what happened to the last person whom had this book, would you?

I'm not sure, I just know that it was found in the girls' bathroom that leaks. Harry answered.

Ah. Well, their loss, I presume.

On a whim, Harry scribbled in the question, Do you know anything about the Heir of Slytherin?

Why do you ask?

Because the school is under attack, and we're trying to find out who it is. I don't think the person they're blaming for it did it, and want to find

proof. Harry was trying not to give away that he was the one being blamed, he thought he might get more information that way.

Ah, yes, I know about that, in fact, this diary was created to help contain that memory, in case anyone tried to cover up the details. Judging by your sad lack of knowledge, it was done with good reason. If you like, I can show you what I know.

This genuinely frightened Harry, he'd heard of devices to hold memories, but this book didn't look like any he'd ever heard of. Those were somewhat cauldron-shaped, but silver, and full of silver liquid. This was a book. Biting his lip, Harry argued with himself. Just as he was about to write his response, in fact as he touched quill to paper to do so, he felt a disconcerting sensation starting with his head. He felt like he was drawn into the book.

Dismayed, confused, and more than a little scared, Harry looked around, to see the hallways of Hogwarts. Hoping that he hadn't gotten himself transported through the school somehow, Harry shivered. Preparing to wail about how he hadn't meant to leave the Common Room, he saw a tall young man walking about the hall, and stopped. The other boy was rather thin, and had a full head of black hair that Harry wished his own would emulate as there was not a strand out of place. Looking up, the other boy smirked, then hid it quickly at the sound of steps. They echoed, and Harry wondered if it was a lot of people in the hall, but found himself gaping in disbelief at the sight of Hagrid being led through the halls. The man's hands were bound in front of him, and his wand, was held in the hands of dark-robed individuals that Harry couldn't catch more than a glimpse of. The Headmaster was walking briskly along with them, as well as a shorter, balding wizard, in much less garishly colored robes.

"Headmaster Dippet, I sincerely believe that if we take the time to gather more evidence we will find Hagrid is not the Heir," the now revealed not-Headmaster Dumbledore began.

"And I've told you that we daren't take the chance," Dippet responded, "Mister Riddle reported Hagrid in good faith that we would act quickly, and thus we needs must. Everyone knows Hagrid has a fascination with the largest, most dangerous creatures known to Wizard kind,

and it's likely that his creature has actually just gotten beyond his control. That happens often enough, you can't deny."

"No, that is true, but I'm still not certain that Hagrid even had the creature that was attacking students," Dumbledore spoke again.

"He certainly doesn't have it now, now does he? He'd have disposed of it as soon as he figured he was suspected to have been holding it," Dippet countered. "No, its best if we send him to Azkaban. It will cover the fears of the students, the parents, and should the attacks continue, he will be proven innocent. It's as simple as that."

"Ah yes, and when he's shown innocent, how will reparations be made?" Dumbledore's fingers were lost in his beard.

"Are you saying that I'm crying wolf, Professor?" the dark-haired boy stepped forward, wincing as Hagrid approached, "I do take offense to that."

"No, Mister Riddle, I'm not talking about calling out the names of wild animals, merely saying that I feel you may have acted, while in good faith, a bit too soon," Dumbledore didn't meet the younger man's eyes.

Harry blinked as the dark-robed wizards tugged Hagrid out of the school through the front doors, and then blinked again as he found himself facing the book once more. Sleepily, he read what appeared on the page in front of him.

Does that help? Truthfully, the then Transfigurations Professor seemed rather eager to discredit the student who turned the perpetrator in. Perhaps he had more to do with it than he wanted to let on, but no one was ever certain.

As Harry was going to write more, a shadow fell over him and he looked up. The Potions Master raised an eyebrow, and then looked at the book in the boy's lap.

"Mister Potter, might I ask what is the purpose of that book?" the man asked.

"It says it was created to keep memories from being lost or covered up," Harry looked back down at the book, where the words had disappeared. He thumbed through it again to the front, and just had time to notice the name it now claimed, before the professor snatched it out of his hands.

"Being Muggle raised, I'll excuse you this once, but don't let me hear of you trusting blindly to things which seem able to think, especially if you can't see that which they think with," Snape hissed.

As Harry blinked, the man glowered at the book's cover, flipped open the page, then froze. Looking at the boy again, and catching the boy's gaze, made Harry nervous at what he saw. Then Harry remembered what he'd seen in the book, and shuddered. Grumbling, Professor Snape stalked off, and left the room.

After a pause, older Slytherins clustered around the Second Year and asked what that had been about. Explaining what he'd read, and wrote, what he'd seen and remembered, Harry waited for their conclusions. As they began talking, he held a hand up, and snapped, "This is the last time I share information for free. You lot aren't, I think it's about time I make you all trade for information too."

Snickers met his statement, and Harry let his hand rest against his leg again, "Potter the information you've shared, and the help we've been providing has been, at least in MY case, an effort to keep the other three Houses from hanging us with our House ties," Flint spat.

"All the same, what you learned actually helps put things into perspective," Landale smiled. "We have a source claiming to be from that time frame that provided information about the events."

"Of course we aren't sure that it was being truthful," Bole argued.

"No, but enough of the details match that we can use it to further our research and to support some of the things we've already concluded," Landale countered.

"So we now know that a Riddle turned in the previous Heir," Derrick held up a finger.

"We can't know that for sure, because the book claimed that Hagrid was the Heir and the Headmaster doubted it," Bole pointed out.

"Well, Riddle turned Hagrid in as the Heir, and Hagrid was then sent to Azkaban," Landale concluded, "Whether or not he was the actual Heir."

"Shouldn't they give people trials before taking them there?" Harry had heard how horrible that place was. He didn't want any part of having sent a person there without knowing for sure that they committed a crime to deserve it.

"More often than not, the outer rooms, where the Dementors carry out their rounds infrequently, are where prisoners are kept while they await trial," Bletchley pointed out.

"So they're still affected even though they haven't been convicted?" Harry yelped.

"Yes," a cautious answer from Flint, with good reason. Harry grumbled about how that was just typical to give even the possibly innocent the punishment of the guilty just because they'd been accused.

"Okay, getting off topic," Bole redirected everyone's thoughts, "What else did we get from this?"

"That book was smarter than it had any right to be," Warrington provided his thoughts, to which most of the rest of the group nodded. "And chances are, whoever had it before was female."

"What makes you so sure?" Landale crossed her arms in front of herself.

"I don't know about you, but I don't want to go into any girls' bathroom with Moaning Myrtle in it. I've heard even most girls don't want to, but no guys will at all," Warrington returned.

"Its very first sentence spoke of being fairly familiar with the person, and its second seemed to indicate that the other was curious, or even nosy," Harry hesitantly offered up for consideration.

"Hunh," Flint grunted. Most of the other students didn't add much, but all of what they'd found was added to the book kept for that purpose.

"Just on a whim, has anyone found any other creatures with stony gazes?" Harry asked.

"Not so far Potter, but I do have to say that, even though I know you didn't do it, you're certainly being framed well," Wells rubbed his chin, "All the creatures that can petrify with their gaze have been reptilian that we know of."

"Sheesh," Harry hissed, noticed the flinching, and then perked up, "Wait, then if we know it's a reptile, shouldn't we be able to presume that the Heir can speak Parseltongue too?"

"No one else seems to have the bad luck to reveal their gift in that direction, Potter," Bletchley laughed.

"No, but we might be able to prove it's not Hagrid." The blank gazes made the small boy laugh, "We know he can't keep a secret for anything, so it shouldn't take much to make him give up whether or not he can speak with snakes, should it?"

"It's an idea at least," Flint smirked, "But none of us have a class with him."

"No, but there's a Hogsmeade weekend not too far off, and he's escorting students," Landale held a finger up, "It shouldn't be too much of a stretch to cast the Serpent Shade Charm in front of him."

After everyone else dispersed, Harry pondered things he'd learned over the last few weeks. He remembered overhearing about the dying roosters, and then puzzle pieces fell together. Just to be sure, he dragged out one of the texts, sadly from under the nose of an OWLs level student who grumbled loudly.

"Sorry, had to check something about basilisks," Harry waved his hand in what he hoped to be a pacifying gesture. Once he found it, the passage indicated their weakness to roosters, and with the news that roosters had been killed, Harry thought that maybe, just maybe, he'd figured out what was attacking students. Then he read that heir gaze killed, rather than petrified, and slumped.

"What are you on about now, Potter?" the older student snapped.

"I thought the creature attacking people was a Basilisk, since they're weak to the crow of a rooster and Hagrid's roosters are being killed. Not to mention that should be more proof Hagrid's not," he trailed off at the look on the Fifth Year's face.

"Potter, I think you're right," the other boy said.

"But the gaze of a Basilisk kills," Harry pointed a finger into the book.

"Only if it's met directly," the grin helped to rebuild Harry's enthusiasm, "There was water on the ground when Mrs. Norris was petrified, so she probably saw it through a reflection, and Creevey probably saw it through Headless Nick. And the ghost was already dead, so it could only be petrified."

"What about Finch-Fletchley though?" Harry asked.

"That's right, he wasn't found near water or with any ghosts," the older boy wrinkled his nose. "I still think it was a basilisk, like you said."

"I heard the Hufflepuff was found in the hall of armor," Landale cocked her head sideways, "So that may answer that. But where would someone keep a basilisk?"

Harry's eyes went wide. He remembered that bathroom with the water all over the floor, and then looked at Landale squarely, "The bathroom you girls found the book, the diary, the whatever it was, where was it?"

"It was the same place as where you happened upon Mrs. Norris. Why do you ask?" the Prefect responded.

"Because I think the basilisk might be getting around through the water pipes," Harry related what he'd heard just before finding Mrs. Norris, and then challenged the older students to point out where the other attacks had taken place. He noted them all and resolved to find a way to get the twins to lend him the Marauders' Map soon, so he could see if the attacks were all centered in or around one location. While he was at it, he was going to investigate the Map, as it seemed, like the book Snape had confiscated, too smart for its own good, and possibly even for Harry's and the twins' good.

"Do any of you have a class with the Weasley twins tomorrow?" Harry asked around, and found a Fourth Year who did, and asked her to get the twins to talk to him some time the next day. He was asked to repay the favor with getting Transfiguration notes from them at that time. He shrugged, thinking it wasn't his fault if she was brave enough to ask them to meet him, but not nervy enough to ask for a few pages of notes at the same time.

"Did you hear?" a Fourth Year dashed into the Common Room, "McGonagall encountered Professor Snape on the way to the Headmaster's office. Seems the Potions Master was going to report the locating of a book to Professor Dumbledore. He thought the book might aid in the locating or capturing of whatever creature is wreaking havoc in the school. McGonagall found out how Snape got it and suggested her office might be a better place for it. The Headmaster agreed, and was Professor Snape mad!"

That sparked more than a little discussion that bordered on arguing. Harry wondered how the Headmaster could presume that the book would be safer with McGonagall than with Professor Snape. Unless it was because of the whole 'Heir of Slytherin' situation. Of course, if that were true, Harry wanted to have a chat with Professor Dumbledore, as he didn't see how all of the suspicions against him could be anything but supported by the Headmaster's actions.

I'm trying to be careful with how things fall into place. I don't want someone to take Harmione's place as always right, so I'm trying to

keep the conclusions and bursts of intuition spread out. Hope I'm doing well with that.

If I could figure out how to lengthen this chapter, I would, but I'm not having much luck in that direction. Sorry it's so short.

I have a question that might affect some of the next chapters. Feel free to respond or ignore. How is it that Bill and Charlie were nowhere around when Harry and Ron went to rescue Ginny? It seemed like it had been a few hours from the discovery of her disappearance before Ron and Harry decided to act. Another question, how likely is it that Molly Weasley will absolutely refuse to allow Harry to try to help rescue Ginny. And finally, how eager are you all for Harry to come out of any dealings with the basilisk without being poisoned?

Harry wasn't sure what to make of the information that the diary had been transferred into Professor McGonagall's care. At least, not until he heard from older students that Riddle had been a Slytherin Prefect, and then Head Boy in his time. For his efforts fifty years ago, Riddle had been awarded with a trophy that still sat in the case, according to one of the Prefects.

At the same time as he learned where the book had been shifted to, Harry found that the professors had also known that the creature attacking students was getting around through the plumbing. Apparently, the Chamber of Secrets was so well hidden, they'd never found it fifty years ago, and were having no better luck now. The boy's sources made it sound like discussions currently ran towards sending the children home until the Chamber re-sealed itself.

Of course, Malfoy bragged about how his father was running the rounds of getting Dumbledore sent away. On the one hand, Harry wasn't looking forward to that, as the Heir would probably see it as a sign to move ahead with their plans. On the other, the old man had done him no favors.

Having intended to meet with the twins to arrange an exchange of the map, Harry was pleasantly surprised by their appearing in the library with it. The trio shuffled to a table and sat down, whispering what they knew. After filling Fred and George in on what he and the Slytherins had figured out, he was rather flummoxed by their reaction.

"Hermione's got the books you're needing." Fred spat.

"She says she's researching other creatures in the books, but they're marked at the sections covering basilisks," George added.

"And when anyone in Gryffindor asks if she's done reading them, she gasps and says no, she's not, proceeds to pull them from her bag and pretend to read them." Fred rolled his eyes.

"Otherwise, its as if she doesn't have them for all the attention she pays them," George grumbled.

"Of course, the OWL and NEWT level students are getting royally peeved," Fred laughed.

"But there's nothing they can do, since she's got special permission from the Headmaster." George snorted.

"That tells me more than I figured on learning," Harry muttered, "but you two ought to know about the book McGonagall just got."

"You found it?" Fred asked.

"No, a female Prefect of my House and three girls of my year found it and brought it back to the Common Room," Harry shook his head, "They left it in the fire, all of us figured the book was ruined. It didn't burn!"

"That's not good," Fred shook his head.

"No, and what's worse is when I figured that out, I pulled it from the fire, and later spilled ink on it. It started talking to me, er, well writing to me and then it pulled me into itself to show me something," Harry explained what he'd seen.

"That's really not good," George repeated what his brother had said.

"Dad always tells us not to mess with things that seem to think if we can't see where the brain is," Fred scratched his head, "So that has something to do with the map, right?"

"Yeah," Harry grinned, "I think it might be something along the same lines as the book."

The twins looked at each other, then pulled the map gingerly out of the bag they'd perched between them. Spreading it out so that the names emblazoned across the top shone proudly, the twins then nodded to Harry. The smaller boy whispered to the map, "How did the Marauders imbue this map with intelligence?"

Mister Moony researched charms for the entirety of our sixth year, to find charms that would modify the parchment to resemble our personalities, rather than the Zonko's paper that insults.

"Is that all?" Harry asked, biting his lip.

Mister Padfoot thinks the junior Marauders and their snakeling should research the charms on Zonko's papers before asking that question. This is, after all, a map with a great many charms on it.

"Maybe we can see it on the Map," Fred suggested, "It being the creature."

After activating the map, the boys peered closely for any indicators of the basilisk. Sadly there were none. Harry noticed that Ron was in the library, and was oddly close to a name he'd seen a few times before, but didn't remember hearing about being in classes. Pointing, he asked, "Have you two seen that name before? It's awfully close to your brother, but I don't see anyone near him."

"Wait," Fred looked at his younger brother while George peered at the name. After a few seconds, the twins switched views, and then looked at each other.

"I swear I've never seen that name before on the map," George gasped.

"How could you not have?" Harry poked at the name, "It's right next to Ron."

"We don't exactly keep an eye out on Ronniekins," Fred fidgeted, "But that's odd."

"We kept an eye out for him last year, when we were pranking him and Malfoy, trying to get them to quit being such," Harry hesitated, "So we should have seen the name then, right?"

"Suppose we should have, so why didn't we?" George grumbled.

A squeak, and the trio looked over at the table Ron sat at, Scabbers was running off the top of the table, and out of the library. Ron hissed and shook his fist at his pet, and then settled back into researching whatever he was looking up. After a bit, the twins and Harry looked back at the map and then back at each other.

"That name's gone," Harry blinked.

"It seems to have left at the same time Scabbers did," Fred rubbed his left thumb into the center of his right wrist.

"How many Peter Pettigrews could there be?" with that the twins shared a look that left Harry wondering what they knew that they weren't sharing.

"What about Pettigrew?" Harry asked.

The twins looked at him, then paled. They looked at each other again, and then down at the map. Fred pointed at the name 'Wormtail,' then gasped out, "Could it be?"

"But Pettigrew's dead, he died when Black betrayed—" George bit out, and both boys looked at Harry wildly. Then their eyes went wider than saucers, and Harry had a second to wonder what was wrong.

"Mister Potter, I see you're investigating things with brains you can't see," Snape reached over and picked up the map. Looking at it for a few seconds, he muttered something to himself. Looking at the top of the map, where the names were, the man then peered at the twins and at Harry. "You have no idea what this is, do you?"

"No sir," Fred stuttered.

"We were just looking at the map, and spotted Peter Pettigrew," George pointed at the paper. "Is there any way it's the same one?"

"Highly unlikely," Snape drawled, then froze. He stared at something closely, then grumbled, "Misters Weasley, you should tell your brother to find a new pet, if he at all can. His rat seems to be on its

way to a gruesome end. Meanwhile, I will take your compatriot back to the Slytherin Common Room."

The twins, not knowing what to make of that, nodded furiously and walked over to their brother's table. Harry stood as directed and followed the man to the dungeons. Just outside of the Common Room, Snape stopped and hissed, "I warned you about objects that are smarter than they should be if lacking a visible receptacle for their brain, and this map falls into that category. Regardless of the fact that they only had one brain between the four of them."

"Professor, is that Peter Pettigrew on the map the same one the twins think it was?" Harry asked.

"It should be impossible." Snape paused, "but should, would and do can be quite different."

Harry noticed that the map was scribbling all over itself, and turned his head sideways to read some of what it wrote.

Snivellus is a teacher? Mister Padfoot is shocked and appalled at this.

Mister Moony is amazed that Mister Padfoot knows a word such as appalled, but has to convey his own mystification at the appointment of one such as Snape.

"Professor, did you know the Marauders?" Harry thought he might finally get a clue as to why his family would have a will written by those individuals in their vault. Or at least, confirmation of his theory that he was related to a Marauder.

"It was not an amicable relationship, to say the least, Mister Potter," the Potions Master growled to himself.

A Potter in SLYTHERIN? Mister Prongs is bewildered, dismayed, and confused!

"They used the paper Zonko's made, correct?" Snape spoke, as he made a sudden turn towards his office, dragging Harry along by a wristhold.

"Yes, sir," Harry was blinking rapidly. He'd gotten confirmation that Potters had had something to do with the so-called pranksters extraordinaire. He wasn't sure any more whether it was good news or not.

Mister Wormtail suspects that the Marauders were set up all along.

Mister Padfoot doubts that Snivellus could have planned something, at least, not that would be this successful. This Potter has to be Dark.

"How would you know, you've never met me!" Harry yelped, "You can't judge a person by the House they're sorted into!"

"Don't bother trying to convince them of that, Potter," Snape drawled, as he closed the office door behind them, "They never got the point as adults, and you're trying to explain it to the mindsets they had as students of Hogwarts. You'll never succeed."

Mister Prongs suspects that Snivellus has been poisoning the mind of a naïve, impressionable Potter for too long, and feels that the Headmaster should be informed.

"Who are they, sir?" Harry almost didn't want to know, but the saying about the cat and curiosity rang clearly in his mind all the same.

"The Marauders were a group of Gryffindor, students," Professor Snape paused and sneered, "who banded together. They specialized in pranks. Much like the twins. Like you last year. The main difference is that while your pranks were geared toward forcing people to see others completely, and the twins' are merely for fun, these clods were only interested in humiliating Slytherins."

Slytherins started it! Mister Padfoot feels it unfair that his family disowned him merely for being sorted into Gryffindor. Just because of that, they called him a 'Blood Traitor,' and lumped him with their views against Muggles, Muggle-borns, and Half-Bloods!

"Ironically, isn't that what you're doing to me now?" Harry asked.

The map had no answer.

Snape sneered, then looked at the Second Year, "Is there a particular password for deactivating this?"

"Mischief managed," Harry's voice lost its emotion, and his eyes stung. He'd lived in the cupboard under the stairs dreaming of his family coming to rescue him. Judging by the things he'd learned thus far, he'd figured that if they weren't exactly family, the Marauders would have at least been close to it. Of course, now he knew they'd have hated him for having been Sorted wrong, and that drove a lance of ice deep into his chest.

While the child was standing, staring off into nothing, the adult was rolling the map up, and ignoring the words written on it. It didn't seem to him that there was any way the Marauders could fix their blunder, and to be truthful, there might not be a way for anyone to fix it. After a few minutes, Harry jolted himself out of his thoughts, and had to ask, once more, "Who were they, sir? I found what was labeled as a will for them in the vault I have access to during the summer. I also learned that there's apparently one of them still living, as it would have been carried out otherwise. So for that will to be where it was, I have to be related to one of them, right?"

"Not necessarily," Snape's response left the boy hopeful for a moment, "A relative could have been a close friend of theirs, and had been entrusted with the execution of the will in the event of their deaths. Sadly, you have the bad luck to actually be related to one of them. Your father was a Marauder. Mister Prongs, I believe."

Sighing through his nose, Harry shrugged, "Go figure. Where do the nicknames come from? Or were they just for laughs?"

"Those four did many things just for laughs, but there was a non-humorous reason for the names they used to hide themselves as Marauders," Snape hissed.

"You're not going to tell me the reason though, are you?" Harry sighed at the negative response. Then a thought occurred to him,

"What's going to be done about Scabbers, or Pettigrew, or whatever his name is?"

"If it proves to be the same Pettigrew, there are a great many changes that will be wrought within the Ministry," Snape's brows drew close together, "Potter, you ought to head to the Common Room. The activation code was swearing to be up to no good, correct?"

"Yes sir," Harry skittered through the door to the Common Room and settled himself into one of the fluffier chairs. He pulled his books out of his bag and started on the latest assignment he'd given himself. He knew all he could about custody, and his rights as far as his vault went.

Now, with Bletchley's help, Harry was putting together a way to prove who had or hadn't gotten into his vault without permission, and to trace where the money had gone. Bletchley's parents apparently practiced law, and so the older boy was fairly well-versed in actual laws. Once Harry had shared his problems in that direction, the exchange had begun.

Since his parents were in the field of law, Bletchley was expected to follow the family trade, but he didn't want to just do the same thing as they did. Harry's half of the trade was in helping the older boy discover what part of law proceedings Bletchley could take part in that were, if not new, at least were new to the family.

Currently the two were wavering between the fields of reparation for those confined in Azkaban unjustly- without trial, or before conviction, and setting up procedures and back up plans for parents who thought they might not live to see their children come of age. Harry was fairly certain Bletchley had other paths in mind, but hadn't brought them up yet.

"Potter, you seem," Bletchley paused, "different. Like someone took your last Chocolate Frog, ate all but one leg, took the card, and then gave you the leg, saying, 'Next time, bring a better card.' What's going on?"

Blinking at the analogy, Harry almost asked how Wizard analogies were better than Muggle ones, but realigned his thoughts to the subject of the question, "I learned something about my family that I might have been better off not knowing."

"Your Muggle relatives?" the older boy sat, and Harry shook his head, "Then what?"

"You can't tell anyone, that's my price for telling you," Harry tried to glare, and the older boy's expression told him how miserably he'd failed. "You've heard of the Marauders, right?"

"Who hasn't?" Bletchley shivered, "They're famous for the way they pulled pranks, and generally made mayhem. The twins spoke of following in their footsteps for the longest time, but stopped last year. Mostly, us Slytherins have grown up on stories of how they made life painful for Slytherins, and Professor Snape speaks of them as worse than the muck you get on your shoe when you don't watch where you're walking when you walk behind your pet Kneazle."

Snorting, Harry nodded, "Sounds about right. Well, turns out, I'm related to one of them."

Bletchley paled, "You're not joking?"

"I wish I were," Harry sighed, "I only just figured it out, and I'm trying to figure what to make of it after that, so I'm not ready for anyone to know, just yet."

"Well, sure, you told me," the older boy paused, "I doubt this will help, but you don't seem to be much like them. For one thing, you're in Slytherin. For another you haven't targeted a House with all the hatred I'm not entirely sure is seething within you, so I get the feeling that whatever went wrong in their generation, it hasn't spoiled you."

"Hn," Harry grumbled, "Anyway. I know we've only talked about a few topics you could study law under, but I get the feeling you might benefit from a wide variety to choose from. Were there other topics you had in mind?"

"My parents focus on the general prosecution and defense portions," Bletchley listed, allowing the change of subject, "My older sister deals with marital strife, and my older brother deals with fraud. So, while it's something we've already researched, I'm not so keen on the facets of getting people repaid for their time in Azkaban that they didn't deserve. I wouldn't mind sending it to my parents, though. So that leaves us with pediatric law. Of course, with the research on magical creatures we've helped you with, we could always branch off into laws for them instead."

"How so?" Harry had a blank sheet of paper out for the brainstorming as he called it. When he'd said that to Bletchley's face, the other boy had asked if it hurt to cast spells of storms in one's head, and Harry could only laugh in response.

"Well, there are laws for and against those with Veela blood, that some feel are too restrictive or too lax, laws regarding the Fey, and Werewolves,-" Bletchley listed.

Harry froze. He remembered a law he'd read about Werewolves, and was also forced to recall that one of the Marauders had gone by the moniker of 'Moony,' so he might have been a Werewolf. His mind automatically skipped a few steps and realized that he'd not been put in custody of Moony because of the lycanthropy, and Wormtail had been declared dead. So if the Marauders were so close, by all rights, Harry should have been in Padfoot's custody, right?

"Potter? You seemed to be off in the Divination Tower there for a bit," Bletchley was waving a hand in Harry's face.

"What do you think about the law in place saying a Werewolf can't have custody of a child?" Harry asked.

"So that's what did it?" Bletchley's eyes lit up. A portion of the younger boy's mind filed that away. It seemed the older boy actually liked the thought of rewriting laws regarding those not considered fully human. "I think that Werewolves are dangerous creatures. During the full moon, they're veritable monsters. But there's a Potion, called Wolfsbane, which is supposed to let them keep their minds during the full moon. I don't see any reason why, if it works, they

couldn't hold down jobs at least. As far as custody of a child, I don't know. I mean, while the kid's young, they might be more of a danger, even with the Wolfsbane, than is safe, but after a few years, with someone else around at least, it might be worth a try."

"You only say that because you don't have anyone in your family affected by that disease," Landale hissed having come into the Common Room from her floor, "I had a cousin who was turned into a werewolf. She was about to receive her Potions Mastery. Instead, she turns into a howling, raving maniac three nights out of the month, and doesn't contribute anything to society anymore."

"Of course she doesn't!" Bletchley growled, "She's been banned from working, refused custody of anything, including herself, and has had her humanity stripped from her even in the eyes of her own family!"

"You do have someone who was attacked in your family, don't you?" Harry asked.

The pain in the older boy's eyes ended the conversation right there. Landale even hesitated and apologized. Shaking it off, the Quidditch Keeper stalked off, right out of the Common Room.

Looking at each other, the two left behind winced. Harry gathered the papers he and the Keeper had been working with, and stacked them neatly. The Second Year then asked one of Bletchley's roommates to guide him up to their floor and to Bletchley's section of the room to leave the belongings there.

At the point when the boy was about to give up the ghost and go to bed, the door opened and a very pale Bletchley dashed in. Looking around, he spotted the Second Year, and then ran up to him. Hissing, he asked, "Potter, you haven't left the Common Room, right?"

"Of course not, Snape would string me up if I did. Your things are near your bed, by the by," Harry replied.

"Good. Or, or not, they're still trying to blame this on you," Bletchley stuttered.

"What now?" Harry groaned.

"I overheard McGonagall talking to Professor Snape. After he returned from the forest, rat hunting he'd said he was," Bletchley's thoughts were obviously all over the place, and his speech matched, "She had to tell him that someone had snuck into her office, and made off with the book he'd put into her care. The only people who know the password to her office are Gryffindors and Heads of House, and the Headmaster!"

"So why are they trying to blame it on me?" Harry asked.

"Because promptly after this fact was revealed, the minister appeared, talking about sending Hagrid out to Azkaban." The older boy gasped out.

"I'll bet they're saying, just in case," Harry grumbled, "So am I next?"

"I doubt you're far off on their list, but I think they're going to get Dumbledore out first." The Keeper rubbed his forehead. "What gets me the most isn't that they summarily took the Groundskeeper off the grounds, or that the Gryffindors, ignoring that one of their own had to have taken the book, are blaming you, but the fact that Dumbledore didn't seem surprised!"

"Yay," Harry rested his head on the armrest of his chair, "Is there anything else?"

"It's only a matter of time before the next attack," Bletchley sank into a chair nearby, "It, well, I,"

"Bletchley, calm down," Flint chuckled, "Take a deep breath, and relax."

Both boys jumped at the new addition's voice. Looking guiltily at him as he strode into the room from the sleeping quarters, they fidgeted.

"You're both acting guilty of something, and from what I heard about earlier, I can almost see why. Potter, it's not your fault you didn't know about Bletchley's family. None of us know all about it."

"No, this isn't about that," the Keeper denied, "The book Landale found in the leaking bathroom was taken from McGonagall's office, and the Gryffindors are blaming it on Potter, like they blame everything else on him."

"Ah," Flint smirked. "Well, we can prove he wasn't outside of the Common Room besides classes, up until this last hour. He's been more or less alone here for that frame of time."

Bletchley spoke a word Harry wished he could have written down, but knew he wouldn't get away with repeating, "That's the time frame in which the book walked off!"

Flint repeated the word Bletchley spoke, and the Second Year knew he'd be better off forgetting it. "I'd almost swear that whoever's framing him knows his schedule to the minute! Things like this always occur when there's no one or only untrusted people to vouch for him!"

"Thanks for caring though," Harry's smile was small and weak. "Even if it's just for the sake of the House's reputation."

"We get you away from those Muggles and through this year, and we're going to do something about your self-confidence, Potter," Flint hissed, "I think half the reason you have as much trouble catching that Snitch as you do is because of that."

"He's still the best Seeker we've ever had!" Bletchley paled.

"Just think what he'd be like then!" Flint grinned, "The scouts would be recruiting him while he was still here, and some of us might benefit from the sidelong training!"

"You want to go professional, don't you Flint?" Harry asked.

"Off topic, but yes, I do," Flint didn't let that distract him. "So we have to work on keeping him from giving away that no one was here with him when the book left McGonagall's office."

"I do believe it is past time for Mister Potter to be getting to sleep." Professor Snape's voice resounded through the room, and startle all three boys to the point that the two sitting were falling out of their chairs, and the one who'd been standing was leaning on a chair, holding a hand over his heart. "Guilty consciences?"

"Sir!" Flint hissed.

Smirking, the man nodded, and waved all three boys out of the room, "I was able to prove Mister Potter's innocence in this on my own, children, now off with you."

As Harry followed the older two down the stairs, he heard Snape mutter, "Never thought the Marauders would actually be good for something."

Imagine me dodging the buzzing bees and hornets whose nests I accidentally trod on. I swear, there's a purpose to all of this. Not that it won't get worse before it gets better, but I do have a plan in mind. The Marauders are going to have 'fun' when they meet Harry.

Seeing as I like werewolves, I'm definitely going to do more than the original story did. Or at least, I hope to.

I also got to looking, and realized that Creevey didn't have Sir Nicholas with him when petrified, but I figure that having Finch-Fletchley spot the snake through armor works just as well as a mirror, right?

P.S. I don't feel like I say this enough, but THANKS so much for your time, appreciation, and assistance. I really do value all of you piping up to tell me I missed something. Or that you're enjoying yourselves. (I figured I'd better say this because I'm really not sure where this story's going as of the end of HP's second year.) I posted a picture on deviantart, that some of you might like to see. toranekohybrid(dot)deviantart(dot)com For those of you that don't like Seelie, well, oops.

"So, Potter, are you going to be a Quidditch player or a Medic?" Malfoy muttered to the brunet Second Year after the class was settled into a test administered by Lockhart. The Professor had, upon setting the test, left the room, muttering about having no material for his next book.

"Right now I'm no more than a student taking a test, so shush, or we'll both get in trouble," Harry grumbled back.

It had luckily been quiet in the days immediately following the disappearance of the book. Harry was still worried about the possible basilisk, and was more than a little concerned that he was going to be blamed for whatever it did next. Knowing that the Professors knew it was a basilisk didn't make the boy feel any better, though it seemed that at least two of the adults still didn't think it was his doing.

Of course, that left the rest of the Professors thinking that if he wasn't the Heir, he was at least working with them. The older students of Slytherin, those that weren't too scared of him, were still trying to figure out how to find the Chamber of Secrets. Harry wanted to ask Professor Snape if all the attacks were centered on the broken bathroom. If that was the case, he felt it might not be a bad idea to investigate that area for secret passages.

Trying to return his concentration to the test, Harry was annoyed to find it was just like all the others of the year. Rather than asking about important information, like how to deal with Fey glamours or to disenchant oneself of a Vampyre's charm, the man asked fool questions about himself. Harry didn't care to know what color robes Lockhart had worn while subduing the Yeti. Nor did he particularly understand the man's fascination with students remembering how curly the man's hair had been when facing the horde of Vampyres he'd encountered in America.

The man hadn't even explained the differences between Vampires, Vampyres and Dhampirs. The only reason Harry knew there were the three types of blood sucking entities was because he'd done that research trying to find a creature that could petrify with its gaze. So, Harry was able to study with the older students who were preparing for their OWLs and NEWTs, but seemed to be failing horribly at

Lockhart's tests. Or he would be if the man weren't dreaming up outrageous excuses to score his grades higher.

So far, Harry's favorite was getting a perfect score for finding all of Lockhart's spelling errors on the test. Shaking his head, Harry circled another misspelled word and made a random guess as to whether or not the ghoul had been mystified by the Defense Professor's brilliant smile. Snorting to himself, Harry wrote 'Five time winner of Witch Weekly's Best Smile award,' in parentheses and added that he thought the ghoul didn't have eyes to be dazzled with.

After Harry gave up pondering whether or not Lockhart had told the locals of his Order of Merlin, and just wrote 'no,' he turned the test over, signaling he was done. It zipped up to the Professor's desk, and the boy pondered what it meant to have the Keeper of the Grounds off the grounds. He knew that there were some older Slytherins feeling it was about time, as they saw Hagrid as being almost as much of a danger as the creature he'd supposedly brought to the school fifty years ago.

Noticing Ron, Thomas and Finnegan finishing their tests at nearly the same time, Harry smirked to himself. If anyone else had been paying attention, they would have read that as a sign of the three corroborating on the test with one another. Harry really didn't care, as he knew how much care anyone other than Granger was putting into the tests at this point. The older students of Slytherin had made it obvious that questions about Lockhart's toilette wouldn't be on the OWLs or NEWTs, so most of the time studying was spent actually learning about the creatures mentioned. And verifying the methods the man extolled as being how to eliminate, control, or dispel them.

The class as a whole had finished the test, and was starting to get antsy when Lockhart reappeared in the room. Grinning madly, or at least, that was Harry's opinion, the man called out, "Finished? Well, that's just fine! I'll release you all early, the better to get you to class on time. I don't exactly see the point in having us Professors guide you around from class to class, seeing as the culprit has been apprehended. Why, I'll wager in a few weeks, when the obvious lack of further attacks reaches the ears of the Ministry, they'll all sit back, relax and laugh at how overboard they went in their precautions!"

Groaning as he was reminded of the newest set of rules the Headmaster had issued, Harry picked his bag off the ground. He felt only a little better, as the rest of the school was suffering under the same lock down he'd been dealing with for much of the year. It hadn't taken long, in fact, this was the first whole day of it being in effect, for Malfoy to complain about the restrictions. Harry had merely raised an eyebrow and said, "Now you know how I've felt all year."

On the way to the next class, Harry spotted a trail of spiders crawling along a wall. He shuddered at how frantically they moved. It seemed as though they were being hatched in the castle, but then they all wanted right back out. Hearing Finnegan, Thomas and Ron mutter about them, Harry knew he wasn't the only one to notice. He decided to ask Professor Snape, in the next class, if he knew of a colony of spiders somewhere outside of the castle.

Just outside the door to the Potions classroom, Lockhart stopped, "There you are boys and girls, safe and sound. I'll be on my way back to my classroom, all the better to receive my next class of students."

As he left, the Second Year Slytherins looked at each other and sighed. They pushed open the door to the lab and started walking through. Harry laughed to himself as the Gryffindors, after a pause, followed. Both halves of the class were seated quietly and waiting, far from patiently, for Professor Snape's appearance.

The doors to the room flew open and smashed into the walls on either side. Storming through, Snape stalked to the front of the room. As he stood in front of his desk, he snarled, "Whose bright idea was it to allow Lockhart to leave you in the classroom by yourselves? What would you all have done if the attacker had appeared in front of you? Or their creature had happened upon you? Sitting in the classroom all clustered as you are, you would have been easy targets!"

"But sir, what were we supposed to do when he up and left us there?" Ron without stopping to think, piped up. Harry winced, partially in sympathy for the points Gryffindor had just lost, and partially because he knew what was coming next.

"You were supposed to follow him back. He should know his responsibility to you students. You, also should know your responsibilities to yourselves!" Glaring universally around the room, "Twenty points from Gryffindor for not standing up to receive proper protection for yourselves!"

As half the class grumbled about losing points, the other half knew they were in for it when they got to their Common Room. Hearing that had Harry wondering if there were any protections on the classrooms for the students. He'd have to ask the Professor when the Second Years got their lecture in the Common Room later.

Otherwise, class went as normal. Working with Longbottom, Harry brewed a slightly off-color Stone Toxin. If he guessed right, the darker-haired boy thought the May Den's needles had been stewed just a little too long. That likely meant that instead of turning granite solid objects into ones with the solidity of iron, the potion would make granite feel like it was made of gold. Sighing, Harry supposed it would have to do. The mistake wasn't even going to be enough to help the students in the infirmary, so the boy just resigned himself to a lower grade. With the events of the year, he wasn't even allowed to redo the potions, because both Slytherins knew no one would believe either of them should an attack occur.

Releasing the class, Snape led the Slytherins to the Great Hall alongside the Gryffindors. As everyone was sorted out, to head back to their Common Rooms, the agitation of Gryffindors in general became apparent. Wondering what the cause was, Harry tried to catch a glimpse of the twins or Professor McGonagall. Even the Headmaster would have been a welcome sight. Sadly, when any of those individuals appeared, it wasn't the relief Harry was hoping for.

Standing in the doors, with the twins at either side of her, Professor McGonagall called for Ron and Percy to join the small group. The Headmaster moved from the doorway to the opposite side of the room. Upon reaching the table the Professors sat at to eat, Professor Dumbledore spoke to the entire room.

"It is with great regret that I report another attack has occurred. Your heads of House will all see to it that you are returned to your

Common Rooms, and from there, your parents and guardians will be informed that you are to be on the train back tomorrow." The headmaster nodded sadly to the Professors, and turned to the small cluster of redheads standing by the Gryffindor table. Harry noticed a missing redhead and guessed that the latest attack had fallen upon the youngest Weasley.

"Move on, its time to go," Professor Snape moved the Slytherins along. Indicating that the Prefects were to lead and walk along the perimeters of the group, he brought up the rear. After the cluster reached the Common Room, he had them remain for a bit.

"The last attack, while so far, not fatal, was the last indicator that the Board of Governors needed to suspend the Headmaster from the school. At the same time, it was decided that the school was no longer safe for students to remain." Snape explained when he returned.

"Sir, what was with the Weasleys gathering in the Great Hall?" Malfoy asked.

"It was probably the youngest who was attacked, in case you didn't notice she wasn't there," Flint muttered. Harry was glad he'd kept quiet, as that would have further implicated him had he piped up, he was sure.

"For now, the plans are to send students home, and hope that our resident Monster Extermination Expert," the sarcasm was thick to Harry's ears, but the Second Year wasn't sure if anyone else heard it, "to deal with the creature or the attacker."

"What about her family?" Harry asked.

"The Weasleys in Hogwarts are going to remain until their parents can retrieve them. The Headmaster felt it was best just to convey that there had been an attack and one of their children was the victim. When they arrive, the rest of the circumstances will be revealed to them." The Potions Master sighed. "In all likelihood, if this isn't solved better than it was fifty years ago, we will not be returning next year."

Harry wasn't sure how to react. The other students quickly filtered down to their rooms, and were setting about packing. Harry, however, was determined to ask the professor a few extra questions.

"Sir?" the boy asked after the majority of the other students had left, "Was the Headmaster going to tell the Weasleys it's probably a basilisk?"

"He was going to inform them of the chances of their daughter's survival." Snape nodded. "Did you have a better idea?"

"Not sending Lockhart?" Harry blinked, "He doesn't really know how to deal with the creatures he writes about having fought in his books."

"Can you prove this?" Snape's eyes focused tightly on the boy in front of him.

"Ask Granger for her notes from class, or even any of the girls in Second Year. I don't know if the older girls will have taken the notes, but I know for a fact that in his book he gets details right, but in class, he messes them up horribly." Harry listed, "He told us that the Disarming Spell is meant to just fling things away from the point they started at. The books say it's meant merely to remove a wand from a dueler's grasp."

The man stood still, "Is that all the proof you have?"

"Sorry sir," Harry looked to the ground, "but all of his mistakes are made in class, he's been careful not to say anything outside. Unless you count his attempt to dispel the snake in dueling club, or his making all the bones in my arm disappear instead of healing them."

"Hn," Snape stared through the twelve-year-old in front of him. After a bit, Harry remembered the disappearance of the book, and then how tired he'd been after returning from the memory it had shown him.

"Professor, did that book ever show you any memories?" Harry asked.

"No, I wasn't foolish enough to allow it to," Snape smirked.

"I was tired after it finished showing me the one memory, maybe it drew energy from me to do so," Harry paused, "So whoever took it might have been very tired, often, because it was showing them more than just the one memory."

Snape's gaze snapped back into focus, and Harry was caught by the nearly black eyes. He remembered every time he'd seen the youngest Weasley that year, and noticed how tired she had always seemed. Though he hadn't noticed then, he certainly was noticing now. He was also thinking about how odd it was to remember those instances now of all times. When the Potions Master looked away, Harry blinked.

"Sir, could Ginny have had the book for a time?" he asked. Snape's eyes flashed back towards him, and the boy looked away quickly, figuring he was about to be snapped at.

"It's a possibility, Mister Potter, but you would be best suited to keeping it to yourself. After all, if anyone hears you asking that, they will jump to the conclusion that you are accusing the girl of something, and with her being the latest victim," Snape trailed off, and Harry shuddered.

"Yes sir," nodding to himself, Harry motioned towards the students' rooms, "I'll pack now, sir."

The two went their separate ways and Harry kept wondering about the events he'd remembered. Tom Riddle had written the diary, had used Harry's energy to show the memories it claimed to be keeping for posterity. If Ginny had had it, she would have definitely been tired. Its vanishing act indicated it was important to figuring out who the Heir was. The victimization of the girl might mean she had known whom the Heir was this time around as well. Figuring that the adults already knew this Harry suddenly remembered that he'd never gotten the chance to tell the Professors to try looking for a central location within the space of the attacks.

Harry mentally sighed and folded the last of his clothing into his trunk. On top of the robes, he set his wrapped bottles of ink and quills. He was hoping to have access to his trunk this year, to finish his

homework. He might even be able to get a head start on studying, in case they could return for next year. Then he remembered that he had no idea where he was headed. He hoped it wasn't to the Dursley's. As safe as the Headmaster thought he'd be, the Slytherin child didn't agree. That was partly the reason the boy was leaving out his invisibility cloak. He tucked it into his robe pockets, and vowed to find a way to fold it into his denims pockets on the train ride back.

Double-checking to make sure nothing was left, he then closed his trunk, and locked it with a mundane lock, Harry pocketing the key. Noticing the other Second Years looking at it, he shrugged, saying it was because he might have to go back to his relatives, and if he used magic to lock it, he'd never get it unlocked before next year, or whenever the school was opened back up. The others continued to look at him oddly, but he didn't stick around to find out why.

Returning to the Common Room, Harry found the female Seventh Year Prefect sitting near the fireplace. She looked up as he approached, and though a bit nervous, remained civil.

"I know you've thought I was behind this at points," He spoke to the older student, shrugging, "But when this last attack happened, I was in class. Since that kind of thing hasn't been proof enough so far, I can't hope to convince you I don't mean any harm to anyone. I just wanted to know if there was a way to convey a message to Professor Snape when we aren't sure where he is."

"Not, exactly, Potter," the girl hesitated, "But if we called for a House Elf of the school, we might just be able to get the message relayed that way."

"Do you know any names of House Elves at Hogwarts?" Harry asked. The only House Elf he knew was attached to a specific family, he was sure.

"No," she shook her head, "Sorry."

Sighing, Harry warned her, "You're going to look at me funny for this, so prepare for it. Do I just call the House Elf's name?"

"Yes," She was getting good practice in already, Harry could tell.

"Dobby!" Harry called out, quietly, but decisively.

With a pop, the hyperactive House Elf that had blocked his mail during the summer appeared. "Is Mister Harry Potter needing Dobby to be taking him back to his relatives?"

Boggling, Harry asked, "How in the world would you do something like that? I mean, never mind! I need you to tell Professor Snape that I think the attacks all circle around a specific location. If he and the other professors look in that circle of space, they might find some clue to where the Chamber of Secrets is."

"Mister Harry Potter is trying to find the Chamber? Dobby is not being able to help with that. Dobby's master is wanting something Dobby isn't supposed to tell!" Twisting his ears and smashing his head into the grate in front of the fireplace, Dobby began wailing about being a bad elf. Harry jumped, but the Seventh Year sat stoically.

"Dobby stop!" Harry tried to catch the elf's hands and hold him still, but found it difficult. The elf would stop beating itself while Harry held on, but as soon as the youth released him, he would return to smashing things into his head or his head into things, whichever was a more convenient solution.

"Potter, the elf can't help you with your problem," the Prefect spoke up, "He's obviously been ordered not to interfere with this Chamber of Secrets business. I'd say find out which family he's attached to and you'll have a clue as to who's behind this."

"So, what, am I supposed to have everyone else in the school parade past him to see if they recognize him?" Harry yelped, "Or am I supposed to ask Dobby who his master is?"

The elf increased the tempo at which it beat itself at the second question, continuing to wail about being a bad elf. The commotion was interrupted as the door to the Common Room opened, revealing a surly Potions Master.

"Mister Potter, why was a House Elf punishing itself in Slytherin's Common Room?" Snape snapped.

"I was trying to get it to tell you that I think all the attacks circle around the origination point of the creature attacking," Harry peered up, "But then he started smacking himself around, and hitting his head into the grate in front of the fire."

"The message has now been conveyed." The man snapped again, "If you will accompany me, Mister Potter, the Weasley parents wish to speak with you."

Any and all color in the boy's face washed out. As he was facing the other way, leading, Snape didn't notice. The Seventh Year might have noticed, but Harry didn't know, since he was following diligently, and not looking back.

Reaching the Great Hall, Snape pushed open the gigantic doors and led the child into the room. As they reached the congregation of flame-colored hair, the brunet shuddered at Ron's expression. Something told him that his year mate was behind this meeting.

"Oh, Harry, dear, I'm so sorry you've spent the year with everyone doubting you," Mrs. Weasley gushed and pulled Harry to her in a tight hug. Harry's eyes went wide, and he could just barely see the twins' faces. They seemed torn between smiling and feeling guilty for wanting to smile. Ron, however was furious.

"Mum! He's the one behind it all!" Rone spat, "He's a stinking Slytherin git who tricked Ginny into going to wherever the Chamber is! He's gotta know where she is, make him tell, or she's gonna die at the hands of his pet whatever!"

"Ronald Weasley!" the matriarch released Harry and turned on her youngest son, "Do you have proof of this? Can you prove that this boy is the one behind it all? If not, you will stop accusing him this minute! Your brothers trust him, and if there's anything the twins are not, it's gullible!"

Sputtering caused everyone in the room to turn to the doors. Professor McGonagall was leading three more red-headed people into the room. After a brief discussion, Harry realized that they were the father and oldest sons of the family. Wondering what in the world job would allow a person to have a fang earring, Harry pondered whether or not he could get a job there too. After all, if having a tooth poked through your ear was nothing, maybe having a lightning-bolt shaped scar wouldn't get him looked at twice.

"Oh, that's right, Harry, you wouldn't have met Bill and Charlie yet, would you? Neither of them would be here, except Bill had finished taking down the wards of a tomb just as the year started, so with the goblins' policy of at least two months break between tasks, he's got time to spare. And Charlie, well.." Mrs. Weasley pointed at the two as she spoke their names, then rested a hand on the dark-haired boy's shoulder.

"The other dragon handlers took a shine to Ginny last year, and told me in no uncertain terms that I was supposed to go home and help mum and dad with her, or they'd disown me," the slightly shorter of the two tried to grin, but it was stretched too thin.

Mrs. Weasley continued, for the benefit of her oldest children, "Fred and George more or less adopted Harry last year. If we can get Ginny back quickly enough, we can focus on talking Professor Dumbledore into allowing us to bring the poor child to our house this coming summer."

With the offhand way she mentioned her youngest child, one would think the woman didn't care one way or another what would happen. Shocked, Harry looked up at her face and saw how tightly she was holding her self, her face, and that she was just barely not bursting into tears. Biting his lip, Harry wondered if him mentioning in front of the red-haired clan what he'd already told his Head of House would do any good. On second thought, he figured it would make the rest of them feel that Ron had the right of it.

After all, back at the Dursleys, all Harry had to do was open his mouth and what came out would be so easily twisted into a

confession of guilt of some kind. It rarely mattered whether or not Harry had even been there, he was just as doomed either way.

With that thought in mind, the Slytherin decided to keep quiet. He looked around and noticed that the Weasleys, and by extension, Harry, had been left in the Great Hall without any Professors standing guard. Turning his head to the left, Harry voiced that fact out loud.

"Oh that's because the Professors were following a lead Snape said had been revealed to him," Charlie spoke up. At least, Harry thought it was Charlie, the two oldest brothers had moved around since they walked into the Great Hall, and that eliminated the child's original position recognition. With the number of children the family had, the dark-haired boy wasn't about to assume he knew a name, not with the new ones. It had taken him half of the year before to tell Fred and George apart. He was of half a mind to think that the entire family looked too much alike for his peace of mind. Excepting the missing child, of course, she wore her hair longer even than the brother with the earring. Having to think of them as the oldest brother with the earring and without was actually infuriating Harry, and he was about to point at them and test his guesses as to their names when the doors of the Great Hall flew open.

Later, Harry would claim his reaction was based on paranoia of the Slytherin Heir's creature being a basilisk, but no one would quite believe him. All the same, at the sound of the doors opening, Harry ducked under a table in the Great Hall, covering his head. After a few seconds, he heard footsteps and Professor Snape snapping his name.

Peeking out from under the table, Harry looked up to several smirks and grins. Ron was even biting back a laugh.

"At least one of you has the sense to try and hide should the creature wend its way in here," Snape snarled.

Sheepishly, the Weasley parents shook their heads. Mrs. Weasley demanded, "Does that mean you've found her?"

"No, not yet," Professor McGonagall sighed, "Professor Lockhart has disappeared, and with the clue we were given a while ago, we have pinpointed the location we think the creature has been coming from. Sadly, through the ghost of the girls' bathroom in question—"

"Moaning Myrtle?" Ron interrupted. He then gulped audibly, to his brothers' amusement, at the Transfiguration Professor's heated glare.

"Yes," Flitwick bounced and added to the conversation, while nervously smiling at Harry. "She informed us of her death at the hands of the creature fifty years ago taking place in that room, and having heard hissing not long ago. She wasn't specific as to appearance, but she indicated that a student had stood at the sink that has never worked, and had hissed at it."

"Which suggests that we need a Parselmouth to move any further." Professor McGonagall looked at Harry.

"You'll not be risking one child to save another while I'm here!" Mrs. Weasley yelled, pulling Harry to her. The dark-haired boy got the feeling that the woman felt nothing by halves, and was of half a mind, pardoning himself for the pun, to be happy she liked him.

"We had no intention of doing thus," McGongall reassured her. "We had just decided to blast the entrance to the chamber open."

"What if it causes a collapse of the whole tunnel?" Fred yelped, "That'll kill Ginny just as sure as whatever's got her would!"

From there, things degenerated into loud arguing on the parts of the Fred, George, Ron and Mrs. Weasley. Percy and Mr. Weasley seemed happy to keep out of it, and the two oldest brothers were actually arguing for leaving the Second Year out of it, on the grounds of the school wouldn't have him insured. Whereas Bill was covered by his employ at Gringotts', and Charlie was already impossible to insure, being a dragon handler. That sparked another argument where Mrs. Weasley yelled at her oldest sons, asking what made them think she was risking two of her children to save one, if she wouldn't risk one for one.

Harry ignored the warm feeling that caused and checked to see if anyone was paying any attention to him. Noting that they were all either focused on the argument or part of it, he quickly and quietly pulled the invisibility cloak over himself. The Great Hall doors were still open and Harry walked through them, hoping his steps would be covered by the yelling voice of Mrs. Weasley.

Peering nervously around, Harry edged towards the wall, and could have sworn his ears were hurting with the effort he put into listening for the basilisk. He hoped he'd hear the scales rasp along, but he was also looking into the lights cast along the ground. He saw no shadows, not even his own. As he approached the bathroom Myrtle haunted, he heard voices approach.

Edging towards the door in question, but not pressing against it, Harry blinked rapidly as he saw the two eldest brothers stalking along, arguing with Professor Snape. Part of him thought the three got along, but that seemed only to be the case because one brother acted as thick-skinned as the dragons he worked with, and the other worked with goblins. The latter were said to be even grumpier than the Potions Master on his worst days, so Harry began to understand.

If Harry weren't trying to sneak past them, he'd have asked them why they were being so loud. Instead he held his breath as they reached the door.

"The ghost said it was the sink that never works, right?" the shortest of the three spoke up.

"If you didn't catch on to that the first or second time it was mentioned, Weasley, your ears are even more defective than they were when you were a student." Snape growled.

"You're sure we'll find that missing Second Year here?" the taller redhead looked around tentatively.

"More likely than not, he's out to perform his annual task of heroism." Snape snorted, "If he's here now, he might as well reveal himself, the points have already been removed from his House."

Sputtering, Harry released the breath he'd been holding too long and pulled the cowl back down from his head. He glared at the three standing there.

"Ah, Mister Potter, it's nice to see you made it intact. Bill you owe me a Galleon," the shorter redhead smirked, "Mum was beside herself when she realized you'd sneaked out."

"Be that as it may," Snape waved them on and pulled the door to the bathroom open, edging to the side as he did so.

"Was there a particular reason you opened the door without walking straight in?" the ghost warbled at them as the four walked in.

"How were we to know whether or not the basilisk was in the room?" Harry blinked at her, "You were killed by it in here, weren't you?"

"Ah," she pretended serenity and wisdom for a second, then Harry's question fully registered to her and she began wailing, "Why does everyone have to ask me that!"

"He hadn't heard about it yet, that was all," Bill tried to calm her down by asking about the faucets, "Which one doesn't work?"

"Do you think I'm stupid? You're only asking that because you want to rescue that little girl! No one tried to save me! I think she ought to die, so I'll have company," the ghost folded her arms in front of herself, and pouted.

"I doubt it would be that difficult to look into having you exorcised." Snape hissed.

The ghost began wailing pitifully and zoomed out of the room, or at least toward the toilets. Her departure caused all of the sinks to pour water at the maximum pressure. At the same time toilets sprayed water and everyone in the room shuddered at the mess. Harry figured Filch was going to have a fit.

Shuddering, Harry tried not to imagine the kind of water spraying around the room wildly. He walked to the sinks and looked for the

only one not spouting water. When he found it, he looked at the porcelain for any trick handles or levers.

"Just try speaking in Parseltongue," Bill suggested.

"Er," Harry hesitated, "I don't know how I do it. I've only ever spoken it twice to my knowledge, and I was faced with either a live or a conjured snake that looked alive."

"The spigots and faucet look like snakes, Mister Potter," Snape pointed out, "Work with that."

Harry stared at the snakes adorning the sink. He tried remembering the snake he'd seen at the dueling club incident and the one he'd seen in the zoo. He imagined that the faucet was a silver snake that was simply holding still, waiting for him to say something to it, to give it permission to move. The other two were waiting for the first to move so they could as well. When he felt convinced enough in this illusion he asked the snakes to open the path to the Chamber of Secrets.

First I'm going to duck for cover as this is pretty close to a cliffhanger. I figured eleven pages was enough for now. As far as the year goes, did anyone notice that we haven't even had a Valentines' event?

Second, I'm not trying to write Harry as a coward. I hope he doesn't come across that way, he's just terribly jumpy, with the basilisk on the loose, and being in the same room as Ron, one of the most vocal in declaring him the 'Heir' isn't helping him any.

Third, I have only my own mental images as to what the eldest Weasleys look like, so I'm going to mention the fang earring and ponytail quite a bit. I've looked up their appearance on the lexicon and in the book (repeatedly), but for some reason (meh?) it doesn't stick with me past the earring and ponytail, and Harry thinking Bill was cool looking. They don't even show up in the fourth movie!

Last, I canvassed you all for how believeable you'd find the eldest Weasleys' arrival, and felt compelled to provide my explanations here. I'll probably make it explicit in the story later, but right now, the reason why Bill and Charlie found out so fast is that, while owls aren't that

fast, I would guess that the dragon reserves have someone near a floo station at all times for emergencies. And Bill, being on a break of some kind, would likely be a bit more accessible. If that's not convincing enough, let me know, but please be civil. I'd probably still respond, but I won't be nearly as grumpy with you.

The grating and grinding of the fixtures moving left the Second Year gaping. He stepped back and felt like hiding his ears behind his hands as the noise continued. When it finished, there was a hole where one of the sinks had been, and the oldest Weasley looked down it, then grumbled.

"That's utterly disgusting. Gin's going to whine about her robes being ruined when we get her out of there," Bill muttered.

"You're just lucky the basilisk wasn't waiting in the tunnel for you," Snape glared.

"Okay, oh Mister expert in dealing with basilisks," Charlie drawled, "How do you propose we move forward without dying at its eyes or turning to stone?"

"Could we cast a Freezing Charm over the area?" Harry wondered if maybe they could deal with the creature by sending it into a hibernation mindset. Reptiles didn't like the cold, right?

"Nice attempt, Mister Potter, but there's a chance that the snake isn't even in the tunnel, and thus we'd only be chilling ourselves." The Potions Master thought for a second, "Besides, that spell doesn't work on reptiles past a certain mass. They tend to have a defense of some kind against it. Dragons in particular, as you should know Mister Weasley."

Wincing, Charlie muttered about how unfair it was that the man could still make him feel like a First Year caught causing trouble. Bill returned with a joke about how it was unfair that he could use their last name but still everyone knew just which Weasley he was talking about.

"I doubt that's unique to Professor Snape though," Harry pointed out, "Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster both have that ability."

"Don't take this wrong, but would you mind either fully hiding under the cloak again, or fully un-hiding yourself?" Bill eyed the boy's head nervously, "That's a bit too much like Sir Nick for my tastes."

Shrugging, Harry pulled the cloak off, and folded it back into his robes. He remembered hearing about a spell that made a cacophony of sounds, often used to distract creatures in their native habitats.

"Snakes don't hear, right? So we can't use the Cacophonous Charm," Charlie nixed Harry's plan before he finished thinking it.

"They feel the vibrations of the air around them against what would otherwise be their ears," Snape explained, Harry hoped, for the student's benefit, rather than the benefit of all of them.

"So how do they hear Parseltongue?" Charlie muttered to himself, "Unless the Speaker is yelling, the vibrations shouldn't be that strong."

"Maybe the language is a form of magic and they feel the magic?" Harry hazarded.

"I say it's a good enough theory," Charlie threw his hands up in the air and prepared to slide down the passage to the Chamber.

"We may be in a rush, but how do you know what is at the end of that tunnel?" Snape drawled.

The redheaded brothers seemed like they wanted to beat sense into the Professor. He kept holding them back, and every minute wasted was a minute less they had to save their sister.

"Maybe we could tie a rope at this end and lower ourselves down that way," Harry suggested, "We might even be able to use the rope to return."

"Okay, okay, I get it. Stop and think not just about rescuing the baby sister," Bill shook his head, hand resting against his nose.

"So we cast the noise charm in front of us to distract the basilisk. We lower ourselves down the tunnel with a rope so we have a better way back. What next do we do as a precaution?" Charlie sighed.

"We'll need someone to stay up here to cast the charm to pull the ropes back up, and we'll need a first aid kit for injuries," Snape listed.

"Okay, I can charm the rope to pull automatically in response to a tug of a certain kind. And the first aid kit," Bill pointed at his brother.

"Dragon handlers are required to have a working kit with them at all times. I figured that rescuing Ginny wasn't going to be any less dangerous than working with any of the dragons." Charlie held out a red and white box, then replaced it into his pocket.

"How do you kill a basilisk?" Harry asked, "The books talk about how it kills, but never speak of how to, er, kill it."

"I surmise that they are immune to killing spells, as they would otherwise fall victim to each others' gazes. As well, they are immune to petrifaction," Snape listed, "Thus, they are probably only weak to brute force attacks."

"There's a plan then, we headstrong Gryffindors will try to kill the basilisk, while you two concentrate on getting Ginny out of there." Bill shrugged.

"And if we plan much more, we'll be riding all on one plan that might not survive the first skirmish, as they say," Charlie had already charmed a few hundred feet of rope, and tied it off against one of the other sinks. He also had dropped the rope down and was standing, holding it, waiting for the rest of the group to agree to move ahead.

"Fine," Snape sighed, "For the sake of the students, we'll keep Mister Potter out of the perimeters of this expedition."

"Okay, I'll go down, Potter, you'll follow me, Professor, you're after him, and Bill, you'll be last, in case the snake's on the outside and decides to follow us in, right?" Charlie listed and as the others nodded, he dove down the tunnel with the rope in his hand.

After a brief silence, Harry heard, "Grab the rope, you can practically walk down with it in hand. It's kind of steep at points, but as long as you don't lose your grip on the rope, you shouldn't bowl past me."

Wincing, Harry grasped the rope and began climbing down the tunnel for himself. It didn't take long to understand that when Charlie said, 'a bit steep' he meant 'hang on to the rope for dear life or you'll fly down the tunnel.' Which is exactly what the Second Year did. As he caught up to the redhead, he curled up into a ball.

It hurt when he was yanked to a sudden stop, as the dragon handler had grabbed him by the band of his pants, "What kind of Seeker are you that you couldn't catch the rope after you started sliding?" Charlie asked.

Wincing at the collection of material in an uncomfortable place, Harry crab crawled to a bit higher up on the tunnel and caught hold of the rope. "Sorry, but my hands aren't going to hold up as well to that as yours. I'd probably take all the skin off my hands if I tried to catch the rope during a slide."

"Ah, that's right. Oops," Charlie apologized offhandedly. He then continued walking down the tunnel. "How'd you lose your grip in the first place?"

"You said, 'a little steep,' but you should have said, 'hold on tight or be ready to slide.' I am short, you know," Harry tried to stand again, only to find it was still too steep.

Harry held on tight to the rope, and heard from higher up, "Mister Potter, you had better not be yanking arbitrarily on that rope."

"Your being a Slytherin doesn't seem to keep him from snapping at you," Charlie mumbled, "I always figured Slytherins had it easy with him as Head of House."

"Hardly," Harry shook his head, and contented himself with walking down the tunnel by holding the rope, and using his hands, instead of his feet, to move along.

Reaching the bottom, the red head cast a charm at the mouth of the tunnel to check if anything was in the area. It read that no living things

were within ten feet, and Charlie felt safe stepping out. A brief look around and he told the brunet boy to come on out, it was clear.

After a few minutes, the Professor and Bill reached the bottom. The four walked a bit further to find a door blocking their progress. Glaring at it, Charlie spat, "Of course. As if walking into a girls' bathroom and climbing down a tunnel wasn't enough."

Harry looked at the door and noted the snakes. He talked himself through the motions of convincing himself the snakes were real. They coiled so wildly, he was amazed that they weren't hissing at him in the first place. Without thinking about it, he asked the snakes to open the door for him, and blinked as they began writhing along the seams of the door. It swung open and after a few seconds, the dragon handler almost whistled, "That is the oddest thing I've ever heard. I've heard snakes hiss, but they don't hiss like that."

"It's magic, Mister Weasley, learn to live with it," Snape drawled as he stalked past the redheads to cast the same charm Charlie had at the mouth of the tunnel.

Bill walked around the door and through it after the charm declared it clear for ten feet. He cast it again from inside the room proper, and then hissed as the lights reacted to the magic cast, brightening the room. "If I never do anything like this again, it'll be too soon."

"Gin had better not get herself into too many situations like this," Charlie agreed, walking behind the Potions Master and the Second Year. The whole arrangement had reversed, and Harry really didn't mind.

"While I was at it, before climbing down the tunnel, I set a spell to warn us if anyone tried to follow after," Bill grinned. As they continued, they passed a shadowy hulk that set Harry's nerves on edge.

"That does not bode well," Snape peered at the snakeskin closely. "It is quite old, perhaps even dating back to the Founders."

"How's it been feeding itself?" Charlie wondered.

"Yes, well," Snape paused, "The rat population of Hogwarts has always been low. I would suppose that was due in part to the basilisk. It may also be true that the basilisk, while a large specimen, might not be as large as it could be. It seems to have suffered a dearth of food during its time here."

"Is there anywhere we could send it?" Harry asked.

"No governments would agree to have something that dangerous shipped to their lands," Bill shook his head. "Even if they did, the other Ministries would suspect them for it."

"So this thing is going to wind up dead either way?" Harry wanted to clarify.

"Most probably," Charlie shrugged. By this point, they had reached a new point of the tunnels. With the adults regularly casting a proximity charm, they felt safer looking around a bit.

Harry peered around gingerly. This place was wider open than ten feet, and was covered in water. Dripping echoed around the room, and Harry knew their chances were slim.

"There goes the Cacophony Charm," Bill sighed, turning to look at the three behind him.

"Not to mention watching the ground for shadows." Charlie agreed.

"At this point, with all of these pipes, I'd say block as many off as we can, temporarily, to keep anything from sneaking up behind us," Bill suggested.

"What about when we have to run, or if our first choice in direction isn't right?" Harry was wondering if this was going to turn out to be a maze.

"We can mark directions we have gone and found fruitless, that'll tell us what's going on that way, and we can mark the way we came while we're at it," Charlie smirked.

"If it actually works," Snape muttered. The quartet continued at an even slower pace. Harry could tell that the brothers were wishing they dared just rush ahead, but Snape was definitely trying to make sure all four, and later five, people in the caverns would be able to walk out alive. Or at least, that's what Harry thought was behind the man's constant harping about caution.

A low groan warned Harry that Bill had seen something he wasn't happy to. He caught up with the rest of the group, and gaped around. The low ceiling had been traded for one that arched so high it seemed to disappear. Harry peered up into the darkness wondering with a shiver, if the basilisk could be slithering around up there. Then he looked at the other three, and noticed what caught their attention.

There was a red-haired girl prone on the stone ground not too far off. The bad part was, the area around her was flat and there was no cover. Harry didn't want to be the idiot sent after her, there'd be no way to protect himself from anything that might sneak up. And sneak up it could.

"Is it really her?" Charlie asked, and Harry boggled. He'd never thought to doubt whether it was really her.

"We'll probably have to take that chance. Right up there with the chance that the basilisk can sneak up on us," Bill sighed.

"How strange that the girl is just lying there, with no one standing attendance," Snape looked even more suspicious than usual.

"Are you saying something in particular, Snape?" Bill looked at the dark man grumpily.

"Whoever brought her down here is running around in here as well," Harry blinked, "If they aren't here right now, we not only have to watch for them, but the basilisk as well. That makes this even more dangerous."

"I don't see any blood, so she doesn't look likely to bleed out," Charlie pulled his first aid kit and shoved it into Harry's hands, "but that

doesn't mean she hasn't been killed already or set up to die in ways that don't require blood loss."

"So we'll fetch the attention of the basilisk, you two try to reach Ginny," Bill seemed to agree with his brother's actions, "Get her out of here, then send out a sign or something, saying you're out. Nothing's come in behind us, and we sealed off all the other paths. So that way should be clear."

"We won't know that it will have stayed that way, if all of us leave this path clear for someone else to sneak down," Snape pointed out.

"We can deal with a wizard or witch, it's the basilisk that can kill us with a look," Charlie dismissed the thought.

"And what of the Killing Curse?" Harry looked up at the two former Gryffindors, "Can't a person cast that almost as fast as a glance?"

"Urk," Bill looked at the Potions Master, "You, you,"

Charlie yanked on his brother's arm as the older of the two stuttered over his response, "We'll deal with that problem as it occurs. We'll just have to take that risk, because I can't sit here watching while my little sister lies there helpless."

The two redheads dashed off in one direction, and began making a racket fit to annoy the deaf. Harry held back until he saw a dark haired individual appear from the shadows to follow them. After a few seconds, the mouth of the huge statue Harry had dismissed earlier opened, and the boy ducked low to the ground, sure as anything that it was releasing something, and the opening to the tunnel was in a direct line with the statue's mouth.

Hesitantly, after the noises faded, Harry peered in the direction of the brothers. He saw a huge snake slithering away, and stood. Snape yanked him back towards the tunnel and walked ahead of him briskly. "Curb your Gryffindor tendencies, if you will, Mister Potter."

They approached the girl on the ground and the Potions Master quickly assessed her status. "By all indicators, she is merely sleeping.

However, her energy levels are decreasing at a steady, yet rapid rate. It seems as though something is feeding off of her magic, and her life force at the same time."

"How kind of you to notice," Harry whirled and gaped at the individual standing not far from them. He noticed Snape pointing his wand in the direction of the dark-haired boy, and wondered how the other had gotten back into the room so quickly.

After a few seconds, he recognized the boy as the one he'd seen turn in Hagrid. "Riddle, why are you here?" Harry asked.

"Ah, you remembered me," a pleased smile slid over the other brunet's face, and Harry shuddered. It seemed like the same kind of smile Uncle Vernon showed his clients and bosses. It was about as real as the man's affection for his nephew, Harry could tell.

"How much longer does she have to live?" Snape drawled.

"Not long now," Riddle nodded, "I've been leeching off of her slowly over the year, so it wasn't much to push her into retrieving the book. She heard where it was, and felt sure that someone would turn her in as the Heir. How ironic."

"She's no Parselmouth, so how could she be the Heir?" Harry asked.

"Come now, Potter, you're smarter than that," Riddle grinned suddenly. Harry heard vague noises echoing through the walls, "Surely you didn't think two hotheaded Gryffindors would be of any use against my pet?"

"Your pet?" Snape smirked, "That creature is old enough to have been here from the Founders' era. What conceit."

"Ah, but I am the Heir of Slytherin," Riddle snarled, "So who better to call it their pet?"

Harry puzzled the information together. The book had used his energy to show him a memory. Snape warned him repeatedly about objects that seemed to have brains, but that you couldn't see where

they were kept. In that case, the book wasn't just a book, it was like a crazed cross between a Pensieve and a book. If the girl had had the book, Harry supposed it could have taken control of her, and made her do things she wouldn't otherwise. He didn't want to be the one to tell the parents Weasley though.

Thinking of the book left the boy wondering where it was, so he looked surreptitiously around the area. Not two feet from the girl's hand lie the book, open wide and flat on the ground. He wondered how in the world to destroy it, if it would even work to save her, as fire didn't burn it, and water didn't soak it beyond use. Harry briefly wondered if tearing pages out would do any good, but discarded that. He figured he'd have to drain the magic from it, but that would potentially hurt Ginny.

His head hurting, Harry rubbed at his forehead and winced. This was reminding him an awful lot of the year before. Then Riddle- a ghost for now- hissed, and Harry had to wonder why he didn't understand what the other was saying.

"Those fools, what do they think they're doing?" Riddle spat. The basilisk was slithering back into the room, right behind the two redheads, and Harry counted himself lucky to have seen the two men running first so he could focus low to the ground instead of high.

"I'm gonna hate myself later for this," Harry stood and ran in the general direction of the lumbering shadow of the basilisk, ignoring the Potions Master's hollering. He concentrated on the fact that it was a gigantic snake in front of him and began yelling at it to stop.

"Little Speaker says stop. Other Speaker says kill. I want food, why do Speakers not agree with each other?"

"There's got to be a colony of spiders in the Forest," Harry hoped he was talking to the basilisk as he stood looking up with his eyes closed. "You could eat them, I'm sure."

"Chitin doesn't agree with me. I like flesh better," the slithering Harry heard getting closer told the boy it was creeping closer to him, "Open

your eyes Speaker, I want to eat you, might get me to speak to all humans."

Harry flinched as he was suddenly yanked away, and winced at the snake's screaming. It called out to those around it, saying it was unfair to wound its eyes, that was the only way it could eat in the dungeons. Harry tried not to hyperventilate when Snape grabbed his arm and growled near his ear, "You and I Mister Potter, will have words when this is over."

Harry watched the two Weasleys throwing rocks around at the basilisk, trying to infuriate it. They had cast an obscuring spell on it as Snape used the Fetching Spell on the Second Year, and now it could only rely on what vibrations of the ground it felt. With the rocks flying all over, it was getting painfully confused.

"Professor, we need to destroy that book," Harry pointed out, picking it up. The ghost stepped forward, and tried to pull it from the boy's grasp. The burning in his head began again, and he yelped, letting go of the book as he was suddenly filled in on what had actually happened the year before. He knew now why his memories had stopped at the Fetching Spell before, because he'd been fetched away from having his head yanked off by Fluffy. He resigned himself to the conversation with Snape later, but he was going to ask that no one EVER again use that spell on him. He was learning to hate it.

He looked up as the ghost screamed. It had won the book from Harry's grasp, but in doing so, caught Charlie's attention. Said former Gryffindor apparently didn't think anything of Fetching the book from the ghost. He then tossed it to his brother, who chucked it at the basilisk.

It bit cleanly through the book, and the ghost's screams began wavering, as it faded out of existence. Dazedly, Harry thought that if they could just trick the snake somewhere where it couldn't get food, they'd all be okay. He remembered that he might be able to talk the snake down now, since there was only one Speaker to converse with. So Harry called out to the basilisk, "The other Speaker is gone, will you listen to me now?"

"You tricked me!" the snake's call told the boy that no, he wasn't going to be heard out, and then it began slithering in his direction. Snape couldn't drag both him and Ginny out of the way, so Harry stood up again and started running. He knew the conversation with Snape was going to be more like Harry ducking his head as the Potions Master yelled anyway, so why not really give the man fuel to grumble about?

Harry yelled every so often at the snake and led it around the passages the quartet hadn't explored. He gulped to himself when he turned down one tube and found it was blocked off. He groaned mentally, hoping he was quiet enough, but as the shadow filled the tunnel, he knew the snake had found him.

"You will be a snack, and the others will be dinner," the snake began slithering into the tunnel, trapping the boy.

Wanting to whimper, wishing he dared argue, Harry curled into a ball, and kept as quiet as he could. He knew why he could have been sorted into Gryffindor, and now he knew, twice over, why he was glad he hadn't. He really didn't like the rush in without thought path, but apparently he had a streak of it built up and waiting for him. Hopefully he'd get away from the Dursleys and could maybe train the impulses out of himself, so there wasn't a third year of this. Speaking of which, he had to wonder how Quirrell could have been allowed on grounds last year. The school was supposed to have the best protections of Wizarding Britain, and yet apparently there were broken parts to the wards.

The snake continued to slither closer and Harry was sure he was about to be bitten in half when it yelped in pain and whipped back around to face the front of the tunnel. He wasn't sure, but he thought something had scraped his arm as it turned. He looked at the wound and pulled a bandage out. If he read the writing on it properly, it was soaked in all kinds of healing agents and antitoxins, so if he wrapped the scrape up in it, he should be okay, right?

He was wrapping his arm, not paying much attention to his surroundings when the snake's tail whipped across the tunnel, breaking open the blockage to the other side of Harry and damaging

the structure of the hole itself. He dashed out into through the opening and sat a few feet away, trying his best to be quiet. He was getting rather tired, he thought to himself, and blinked blearily. Holding his hand to his face, he gaped at the attached arm. Around the bandage on his left forearm, were dark lines webbing their way along. It looked like they lined up with his veins.

Dully, Harry blinked a few times, trying to puzzle out how that would work. Then he remembered reading in his Potions texts that basilisk venom was some of the most potent poison in existence. Those poisoned with it generally had but moments to live. He wondered how he could have been so unlucky to have been scraped by a tooth in that tunnel, but then remembered that the blasted snake had been drooling over the thought of its next meal. Or, Harry thought that had been the fluid at the time. Now he knew it had been leaking venom. He figured it must have settled on a scale that had happened to be loose, and Harry had been cut by that coated scale.

If the scale was loose, would that mean it could come into contact with the snake's own blood stream? Are basilisks immune to their own poison? Muzzily, Harry wondered if he'd get to ask these questions out loud, but a loud squawk caught his attention. Headmaster Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, and Mr. Weasley were standing there, looking sadly at him. Harry tried to smile back, and pointed down the path, "Ginny's down that way. The book she had was... weird, it took her over and made her do things. It's been destroyed now, and she should be okay." He pointed to the broken tunnel he thought was to his right, "I think Bill and Charlie are fighting the basilisk still, and Professor Snape is probably furious at me, but staying near Ginny to make sure she'll wake later."

"Oh my," McGonagall crouched down, to the indignation of the bird Harry just realized was on his lap, "What in the world cut your hand, Mister Potter?"

"I think it was a basilisk's scale," Harry mumbled, trying to be intelligible, "but it may have been coated by its venom. Are basilisks immune to their own poison?"

Harry blinked at the bird in his lap as it crooned at him, and cold drops of water fell onto his hand. It gently worked at the cloth he'd wrapped around his hand and he thought it might want him to remove it. McGonagall confirmed that thought by pulling the cloth from his hand herself. The brightly plumed avian then dripped more of the cold water onto Harry's hand and the boy was left asking himself if the colors meant the bird was a phoenix.

His next thought was shock, because his hand both hurt and was ceasing to hurt at the same time. Footsteps through the tunnel Harry had slipped through made the boy look in that direction. He was so sleepy, though that he fell over, upsetting the bird, who warbled at him.

Charlie peered down, worried, "We saw the basilisk trap him in that tunnel, and then when we started harassing it, it turned. A little later, it suddenly scream hissed, whatever you call it, and its tail whipped the passage behind it. We thought he might have been hit."

"No, not then, but as it turned it scraped him with what appears to have been a venom coated scale," Dumbledore pulled his wand from his robes and levitated the dazed child. Said child wasn't exactly keen on the sensation, and was about to say so when he heard the Potions Master grumbling as he made his way up.

"Judging by the gathering at this juncture, I would presume the basilisk is dead?" he drawled, with Ginny on a stretcher behind him. She seemed comatose still, and Harry wondered if he was supposed to pass out as well.

"It's dead," Bill explained, "I suppose that when its eyes were damaged, and its connection with the Heir was destroyed it went truly and completely mad. I've read that when the venomous creatures go mad, their ability to control their own venom goes with their sanity, and they often poison themselves. I'd guess that happened here."

"Ginny's okay, though, isn't she?" Mr. Weasley spoke up, worried, "She'll wake up soon, won't she?"

"She's merely resting, recovering from the ordeal," Snape's tone was a rarely used one. The lack of anger or disgust was odd to hear. The next sentence from the man, was on par of his angriest tones, and Harry knew who it was directed at. "Tell me that the fool boy is merely exhausted."

"Er," Charlie hesitated, and that was all that the Potions Master needed. He transferred the stretcher and levitation charm to Mr. Weasley and stalked over to his Slytherin Second Year. "Are you trying to get the title of Gryffindor Slytherin as well?"

"Sorry sir," Harry had to wonder how much of the lecture was from worry, and how much was from not wanting the Slytherin name to be smudged.

"It won't have done me much good to have filed the paperwork to get you away from the Dursleys if you go and die, now will it, Mister Potter?" Professor Snape snapped, and Harry peered up at him.

Sheepishly, Harry said, "I thought I might be able to trick it into a tunnel it couldn't get out of."

"More like you simply stopped thinking," the Slytherin Head of House rubbed his nose.

"Makes sense too," Harry sleepily agreed, and fell asleep.

Urgh. I kept trying and trying not to have Potter get poisoned, but the little snot kept poking me in the side and saying, 'you'd better just go ahead with it,' so don't blame me, blame the Pothead in my head. No one's called me on my snippet about 'venomous creatures dying from their own poisons,' so I ran with it.

Gryffindor's sword is not here today, may I take a message?

There's no rooster either, but I tried to explain that in chapter 20 (which I'm still working on). Besides, I almost think that Riddle would have interfered in some way.

When I counted out how many chapters I had left, I knew I was forgetting something. I plotted this out, and my outline has the diary issue taking place near the end of the year still. However, I've got it happening in JANUARY!!! So, I still have to finish out the year, and I'm not entirely sure how that's going to work.

Harry woke in the infirmary, and puzzled out what he remembered of the events in the chamber. Thankfully, he could actually remember them, so he had a lot to work with. Looking around for paper and pen, Harry wanted to write down the things he had to talk to the Headmaster about while he was thinking of them.

Finding what he was looking for, Harry wrote down that he wanted to ask the Headmaster what had made the man block, erase, or whatever he did to Harry's memories of the year before. He also wanted to know how Quirrell got past any background checks the school ran to prevent undesirables from teaching the students. Then there was the question of what in the world made the old man think it was safe to house a Philosopher's stone in the same location as a few hundred students. And that didn't even cover this year's problems.

He was finishing his list, he thought, writing out that he wanted to know why Dumbledore had hired a person like Lockhart, when he heard someone enter the room. He numbered it so that that question would be asked after he asked why the man had allowed Granger to check and recheck the books with the real information on basilisks, even if it could cost the OWL and NEWT level students their grades for the year.

He looked up as a step sounded near his bed, and met the Headmaster's gaze. The wand pointed at him made the boy nervous, so he asked, "Professor, why are you pointing your wand at me?"

"My boy, you are too young to be burdened with such memories as you have now," Dumbledore spoke slowly, as if he were grieving what he had to do.

"So you're, what, blocking my memories until you feel I'm old enough?" Harry raised an eyebrow, "In that case, why don't you just give me a dose of the basilisk venom, I'll never be able to handle them all at once, like I'd wind up with them when you finally decide I'm old enough for them."

"I hadn't thought of that," Dumbledore paused, "Oh dear, that does prove a sad thing. I had just hoped that by allowing you a normal

childhood, you could escape the pressures the Wizarding world will try to place on you."

"Normal?" Harry yelped, "Where's the normal? I lived with Muggles obsessed with the concept, so I was treated like a House Elf, and belittled daily. How is that going to help me have a normal life? Or are you trying to tell me that all wizarding children grow up being told they're a freak daily, and locked into a cupboard for reasons that make no sense to them, without explanation?"

"I think you're exaggerating a touch, there dear boy," the Headmaster suggested.

"I don't personally think so, but you might," Harry shrugged, "Honestly, I don't know what normal kids grow up with, but I did sleep in the cupboard under the stairs until I got my letter to Hogwarts."

"I'm sure they used that as a punishment," the old man leaned tiredly against the bedpost.

"Oh, sure," Harry nodded amiably, "Punishment for breathing. I suppose that when I did something horribly wrong, like getting better grades than Dudley, that warranted being locked in for a day or two without food. And not finishing the sweeping, the weeding, the mopping, the window washing, and the vacuuming in time, meant I deserved to miss dinner, and in fact to have Dudley eat parts of his in front of the door to the cupboard in front of me as well. That's fine sir. I'll ask Malfoy and Zabini if their parents punished them like that, and I'm sure they'll agree with you. Or maybe I ought to ask the Weasleys, seeing as they actually have more than one child to raise. Maybe Charlie and Bill ate dinner in front of Gred and Forge as punishment for not doing their chores, I don't know."

"Of course the Dursleys seemed over harsh, locking you in for not doing your chores each week, but Dudley's actions were most likely due to being a child," the old man didn't seem to get it.

"No sir, those were daily chores," Harry leaned back, getting tired again, "And Uncle Vernon would hand him a chicken leg or a pudding

bowl, telling him to eat it in front of me. As if I ever got the chicken legs or puddings anyway."

"You do realize these are grave accusations, my boy?" the Headmaster finally seemed to be taking Harry seriously. Unfortunately, Harry got the feeling the man thought Harry was making them up.

"I reported this to Professor Snape, who wrote it all down and filed it," Harry looked over the old Transfiguration Professor's shoulder, "He said it had been dealt with. What happened to the observer that was supposed to show up during the summer?"

"I noticed the file, and your name, and put it in their filing as having already been dealt with. The furor that would have arose from your claims would have defeated the purpose of placing you with Muggles, to prevent your growing up to the Wizarding world's view of you." Dumbledore conjured a chair and then sighed, "Harry, my boy, please, reconsider these accusations you're making up. They are just Muggles, and therefore don't know how to treat a Wizarding child. You should know better than to try and use your influence to get away from them. They are doing their best, I am sure, and if you just gave them a chance-

Yelping, Harry interrupted, "You think I'm making this up? Ask the twins and Ron what they saw when they fetched me this last summer! Ask Professor Snape if he thinks I was making any of it up. You know he'd have told me off rather than carrying it as far as it has gone if he thought I was trying to use the power of being 'The Boy Who Lived' as well as I do!"

"Mister Potter, if you would please keep your volume down, there are other patients resting," Madam Pomfrey scolded. "Headmaster, I allowed you in here as long as you didn't agitate the poor child. You've obviously made him upset, so I will have to ask you to leave!"

"Ah, Poppy, but I still need to speak with him. Don't worry, I won't agitate him further," Dumbledore held his hands in front of him, "He just needs to acknowledge that his relatives are doing their best for

him, and forget about spinning a yarn about abuse to get away from them."

"Is that what this was about?" the nurse snorted, "I wrote you a note when he wound up in the infirmary last year. I told you then he was malnourished and showed signs of having had broken bones go untreated. I thought you'd turned that in to St. Mungo's?"

"I felt that such claims needed to be substantiated before they could be turned in." The Headmaster tried to soothe the woman, "After all, with his fame, if it were turned in, they'd have exhausted their resources to investigate, and if it was a false call, the resources would have been wasted."

"How many reports and complaints have you misappropriated?" Snape's drawl sounded through the room, as he walked in, behind Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Professor McGonagall, and the eldest Weasley brothers.

"I keep telling you, even if she's awake, she's only to get two visitors at a time," Pomfrey hissed, "and the same goes for Mister Potter."

Bill and Charlie grinned and then the elder spoke up in a teasing voice, "Aw, but Madam Pomfrey, we're here to see you. After graduating we couldn't help but miss the best Mediwitch in Britain. No one else watches over their patients so patiently."

The Mediwitch in question just tapped her shoes, "You're only saying that because you two have the titles of second most frequent visitor to my ward."

Sheepish grins found their way across the brothers' faces. Harry boggled at this, as his Head of House walked to the side of the bed Harry lay in that was opposite the Headmaster.

"She hasn't woke yet?" Mrs. Weasley whimpered.

"Not yet, dearie," Pomfrey comforted her, "but she's in a restful sleep, not the coma of when you brought her in a few days ago."

Harry rubbed his nose and asked, "How many days ago?"

"I'd say three full days, and we're about five hours into a fourth," Madam Pomfrey cast a quick Time Charm and nodded.

"How much homework have I missed?" Harry asked of the room in general.

"Two days of cancelled classes, and two days of the week's end," Professor McGonagall intoned, with a gentle smile, "Your classmates be glad to take notes for you, and you'll receive extensions on due dates."

"Thank you ma'am," Harry sighed.

"Now, what's this about holding paperwork for Mister Potter?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"It was brought to my attention that Harry was claiming his relatives treated him with less than perfect care, and I reasoned that his very name would generate unusual interest in the situation." The Headmaster related to the Ministry worker, "After all, it is not uncommon for children to hear how their friends' parents treat their friends and decide that they should receive the same treatment. They will then complain that the expectation to do chores is an unfair request, and will wish to report their family to Childcare Services."

"Ah, but did you even take the time to investigate it for yourself, to ensure that they were invalid claims?" the Potions Master drawled.

"What family wouldn't treat Harry with all the care in the world?" Dumbledore countered, "Of course they might not treat him as their own son, but that comes from not knowing how to deal with accidental magic."

"Did you see how Dursley picked him up from the train station last year?" Mr. Weasley asked the Headmaster.

"No, I stay at Hogwarts to finish paperwork and details until the week after classes end." The old man responded.

"Dursley simply growled at him to come along, and told him not to dirty anything in the car with his filth. The boy was as clean as any child can be coming off of the Express," Mr. Weasley explained. "I thought it odd at the time, and even odder when Fred and George felt the need to ask what the rules for custody of wizarding children were. Never mind the talking to I got when they fetched the child from his relatives' house during the summer."

"I had thought that an exaggeration," Dumbledore seemed shocked, "Please inform all of your children that they are, in future advised against removing Mister Potter from the Dursley's residence. It is the safest place for him, and his relatives are merely misunderstood. It will do no one any good if his misconstrued complaints against their well-meaning efforts at discipline are heeded."

Harry wanted to scream, and when a hand tapped him lightly on the shoulder, he yelped, rather loudly, to his dismay, jerked sideways, fell off the bed, and curled into a ball. After a second or two, he recovered, and rubbed his shoulder, peering sourly at Professor Snape, who, he found, had been the one to tap him.

"That was not the intended effect," the Potions Master explained, "But it does prove a point, in my mind. How many children of well adjusted households will have that reaction to a simple tap on the shoulder?"

"I noticed that he reacted rather wildly to the doors of the Great Hall," Bill added.

"That was merely the stress of the situation, I'm sure," Dumbledore offered.

Climbing back onto the bed, as per Madam Pomfrey's non-vocal, yet vociferous demands, Harry hissed. "Where are you getting your information as to how I'm treated, Headmaster? Are the Dursleys your source?"

"My dear boy, it should be enough to know that I have a source. Please refrain from accusing your relatives any further, knowing this," Dumbledore answered.

"No," Harry glared the old man in the eyes. He spent a few brief seconds remembering when he got his letter to Hogwarts, and the Dursley's reactions. Then he remembered wondering if the Headmaster had been aware of the address on his letter. Finally, he remembered what had happened when he had gotten better grades than Dudley in first grade. It had made its point well enough that Harry had never again scored higher than his cousin. In anything. Remembering those things only made him more determined to convince the Headmaster of this.

"Oh dear," Dumbledore paused, "I will definitely have to look into this, seeing as you're adamant. Professor Snape, you still have the reports you have tried to file, I trust?"

"I do, but I'm not entrusting them to you," the Potions Master snarled, "You misplaced the first set, I'll leave you to relocate them for yourself. I've made new copies and will turn them over to Mister Weasley to take to the proper offices. This way we can guarantee they will be seen to."

"Wait," Harry called out to prevent the cluster of adults from leaving, "I had a list of questions I wanted to ask. Don't you go leaving before I can."

Bill and Charlie chuckled under their breath at the Second Year. Professor McGonagall raised her eyebrows and smiled again.

"I wanted to know how Quirrell made it in to teach last year, considering he had that thing attached to the back of his head." Harry asked, "And why the Headmaster never did anything about him using me as the test dummy for spells all year, even if he didn't know who it was."

"It was you they spoke of, my boy?" Dumbledore sighed, "I thought they might have meant Mister Malfoy."

"What difference does it make who it was or who you thought it was?" Harry hissed, "Saying it will build character is a poor reason to allow a professor to target a student like that. And just for the record,

Lockhart did the exact same thing this year. We didn't report it because of how you'd reacted last year. I'd check with the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs to make sure the two men didn't do something similar for their Houses."

Holding up the sheet of paper Harry had written down his questions on, the Headmaster asked, "Is this your list, my boy?"

"Yes," Harry asked, not sure he liked the Headmaster calling him that. He was rather peeved with the man.

"I will read it, and consider it," the old man offered, "And within a day or two, I will return it to you, with answers, if that pleases you?"

"It will have to do, won't it?" Harry muttered to himself.

The Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress left the Infirmary, and Harry flopped against the pillows on the bed. "Sir, did you come here to give me the lecture about acting like a Gryffindor?"

"Just about the time I forgot that your parents were Gryffindors, you do something that reminds me better than simple words could dream of," Snape rubbed his chin.

"I'd say sorry, but I don't think I dare," Harry winced.

"Continue to be true to yourself, Mister Potter," the Potions Master advised, "As much as it mystifies me, it should also do well to keep any foes from being able to predict you entirely. As for the rest of the student body, they are all sufficiently apologetic for having ever doubted you."

"Urgh," Harry groaned, "So is next year going to be like last year, and Fourth Year like this one?"

Charlie broke out in a braying laugh, "If you're looking into classes for next year, and NEWTs bound, I'd suggest Divination with that outlook!"

"No thanks," Harry shook his head, "the future sneaks up on me as it is. I don't need to study the field of 'revealing the future' only to find it really is an ever changing fog no one can truly read."

"You've already read the pamphlets about the classes, I take it." Bill chuckled.

"A few times," Harry shook his head, "I don't know a thing about them, but Arithmancy and Runes sound a great deal better than Divination, just because they're more concrete."

For a few minutes, the Weasleys lingered around Ginny, waiting for her to wake. When it became obvious that she was perfectly content to remain sleeping, they left.

"Primarily, my intent with this lecture wasn't to tell you to stop being so reckless for the sake of it." Professor Snape spoke after the Weasleys left, "It was to tell you that there are those out there who will suffer in some form or another should you die."

"Sir?" Harry blinked.

"You have, even though it is not immediately evident, made friends of your Housemates, through several years," Snape smirked, "They would all be affected should your escapades end badly in future. I daresay that the First Years even would be affected."

"Why?" Harry couldn't dream up a response more complicated than that.

"They have seen how you reacted to the treatment of the other three Houses." The Potions Master leaned back in his chair, against the back of the chair itself, "That, more than your efforts of last year, has told them they don't have to follow the classic definition of 'Slytherin.' I should hope that if you continue to behave as yourself in your remaining years, you could continue to influence them in such a fashion."

"Maybe that's what she meant when she said that," Harry muttered to himself, referring to Landale's cryptic comment about leading the Slytherins.

"Slytherins have often been called cowards," Snape's voice matched the tones he used in Potions, and Harry wondered if he was supposed to take notes, "They forget that the plans a Slytherin mind will draw up, are often enough what helps them survive the first brush against their problems. Even if no plan survives the initial skirmish in war, having that plan allows for the creation of another, as one would otherwise be scrambling from the beginning."

"Sir, you said a Slytherin mind, but you didn't say a Slytherin," Harry pointed out.

"Exactly. I'm sure you've heard your Housemates refer to you as being a Ravenclaw Slytherin. The same can be true in reverse. And, odd as it sounds, the Weasley twins are as close as I've ever seen to Slytherin Gryffindors." The adult explained.

"It's not a matter of what House you were sorted into, but how you use the traits of all the Houses?" Harry asked.

"Good, you got the point," Snape smirked again, "There are Seventh Years who are still struggling with it."

As the man stood, Harry gaped. "You sounded so mad in the Chamber, why are you so calm now?"

"It didn't take me long, Mister Potter to realized that yelling at you does nothing towards getting the desired results," the Potions Master pointed out, "So I tried alternate methods of working with you. It may mean I have to wait a few hours to talk to you, so that I don't shout you into a corner, but I know it will only cause you to get defensive, and to focus on the shouting, rather than the words. You will learn nothing from a shouted lecture, and I will have wasted my breath, and my time. I don't like wasting either."

"Oh," the Second Year breathed. He settled into the pillows and blankets and curled up to sleep again as the professor left the Infirmary, and the nurse bustled quietly around.

I almost delayed the chapter for a day, seeing as I'd made edits and forgot the disk to transfer them with. I remembered enough to give it a shot anyway. Let me know if I missed something, yes?

I have plans for what I'm lining up, I promise.

Maybe having the months between the basilisks' death and the end of the year will get a few more things resolved. We'll see.

By the second day of consciousness in the Infirmary, Harry was feeling more than a little caged in. Ginny had woken up, and released to rejoin the school, and Harry couldn't quite figure out why he was still bed-bound.

During one of their conversations, Professor Snape had to explain that the Basilisk had poisoned the boy in the Chamber, and there was a question as to how the remnants might affect him. After all, there were no other recorded instances of surviving Basilisk venom through Phoenix tear treatments, so Madam Pomfrey wanted a few days of observation.

When this topic was first introduced, Harry worried that they would be poking him full of holes or sticking things to him. Maybe even making him look at inkblots, like he'd heard some of the kids talk about back in Surrey. They wasted no time in reassuring him otherwise, and he relaxed.

As Harry's time in the Infirmary approached a week, the boy asked about his schoolwork and was promptly given the reading assignments he needed. Even from Defense. A question about that resulted in learning that Charlie Weasley, un-certified as he was, had been tapped to temporarily cover the post. Thus the unit being covered had changed from vampires to dragons, and that alone made Harry laugh.

He figured that even if the dragon handler had left the unit as is the students would still have learned more than they were originally liable to. Harry left that subject for last, however, when working, as he actually had to reread the section that covered dragons in the first year's text. Apparently, Lockhart had never 'faced' a dragon during his adventures.

When Madam Pomfrey finally released him from the Infirmary, Harry found himself worried about the youngest Weasley. He wondered how the rest of the school would treat Ginny. Though he was tired of the double standard, it was only Ginny's fault that she had been stupid. It wasn't her fault that a book had used her to do the bidding of the Heir of Slytherin.

At that thought, the dark-haired boy paused, just outside of the Slytherin Common Room, and wondered. Where was the self-proclaimed Heir of Slytherin now? He thought of researching the subject, but that reminded him of his biggest worry. Just how much work would he still have ahead of him to catch back up?

"What are you overthinking now, Potter?" Flint's eyes were laughing as he leaned against the doorway in front of the Second Year. "Dare I hope that you're plotting ways for us to wow the rest of the school in Quidditch, now that the rules are back to normal?"

"You never change, do you Flint?" Landale grumbled as she stepped out of the Common Room, moving around the Quidditch Captain.

"I was actually wondering how much I have to do to catch up to everyone else in the practical sense," Harry sheepishly grinned at the Fifth and Sixth years as they guided him through the door.

"Not as much as you think, Potter," Parkinson giggled. "The Headmaster cancelled school for the two days that the nurse wasn't sure if we'd lost any students, and then for the remaining two days you were out that weren't the weekend, we've only had one session per class, except for Potions and History."

"I still can't believe we've got a Weasley teaching us Defense," Bole grumbled, "Especially since he only graduated a few years ago!"

"I thought you have to have a certificate to teach?" Harry asked. "Or is that how we got Lockhart?"

The boys in the room chuckled as the girls made noises of disgruntlement. Harry supposed that the common view of the former instructor had changed with the abandonment of his post. It wasn't nearly soon enough by his judgement. Still, he wondered just what excuse the Headmaster had dreamed up for having an instructor that everyone knew was under-qualified. It hadn't been explained while he was in Madam Pomfrey's care.

Remembering the Chamber, Harry rethought that mental classification, and wondered if Bill or Charlie Weasley really was under-qualified for the job of interim Defense teacher.

"Do I have time to gather my things before we have to head to class?" Harry muttered to himself, and then froze as his bag was dropped at his feet.

"You never really emptied it before you got dragged into the Weasley family meeting," Goyle grinned.

"We only looked through it enough to make sure it had the right books," Crabbe smiled too.

"Thanks," Harry blinked, then reached for his bag, torn between checking it and trusting that his Housemates hadn't trapped his things while he was gone.

"We also turned in your Charms essay," Malfoy drawled, "Flitwick was rather flustered when we did so, especially when we told him you'd been done with it for a while."

"I wasn't turning it in because I wasn't sure I was exactly done with it." Harry hesitated.

"Really?" Bulstrode strolled past, smirking as she countered, "I thought you hadn't given it to him because he acted like you were a Pyrebug and he was parchment."

"Off to class now," Landale stood at the door to the Common Room, ushering the Second Years out. "You wouldn't want to be late, even if it's just a Weasley teaching it. We do have to keep up appearances, you know."

The ten children leaving the Common Room bunched together as they left the proximity of their safe haven. Harry was especially nervous, seeing as he didn't know how much things had really changed. Were the rest of the students going to smile and nod at Slytherins now, only to mutter about them more quietly than before,

or were they going to be genuine in their treatment of the dungeon dwellers of the school for once?

Sadly, the boy's question wasn't answered in the time it took the Second Years to reach the Defense classroom. They filed in quickly, and took their seats. After a moment or two of silence, the students relaxed, and began to speak amongst themselves in a low rumble.

"The one thing we've noticed about Weasley in the class we've had is that he might not come right on time," Zabini grumbled, "But that doesn't mean he won't."

"Why aren't we having Potions today?" Harry asked, having heard mutterings about the History lesson scheduled for later that day.

"Because Professor Snape's been called to testify against Lockhart for breaking his contract with Hogwarts, and for the release of that great lump, Hagrid." Malfoy drawled.

"Come now, Mister Malfoy, lets not be starting arguments," Charlie Weasley grinned as he strode into the room from the office door. "Sorry I'm late, you wouldn't believe the mess Lockhart left behind. It takes too long to find anything other than his books in there, so we'll just have to continue with the unit on dragons, as out of order as it is. So, since Mister Potter wasn't here for the last session, anyone want to summarize what we've discussed?"

After a brief hesitation, Parkinson raised her hand and when called on, began to recite, "The Wizarding World has a ten species of dragons on record. These species are the ones that have reliable, definable traits that breed true. There are however, other would-be breeds that roam wild. The world's ministries are constantly trying to gather information on them to get them on reserves of their own, to further protect our world from exposure to the Muggles."

"Good job, Miss Parkinson, a point to your House," Charlie said, with an odd look on his face. "Of the varieties of dragon on record, each is known for a typical color of skin, though some breeds have dark tones, it is usually the Hebridean that is considered true black. Horntails are actually red-brown, and Ridgebacks are yellow-brown.

Generally speaking, we think that the deeper the tone of the skin on the dragon, the stronger its breed traits are."

"Breed traits?" Crabbe asked, even with most of his year mates sending him sharp looks.

"Horntails are known for their nasty tempers," Charlie grinned, "Thus, the deeper the brown, the nastier the temper. Of course, if they venture into the shades of other dragons, they sometimes adopt the traits of that breed as well. For example, if you have a Horntail with a rather red cast to his skin, he's not only going to have the sour temper of a Horntail, but also the short fuse of a Chinese Fireball. Those are some of the nastiest dragons to face, let me tell you."

"You said that there are other dragons in the wild," Harry asked, "How do the Ministries know that, if they can't catch them?"

"Most dragons in reserves are red, brown, green, black, opalescent, and blue." Charlie shifted his weight from one foot to the other, "In Romania alone, we've seen flights of dragons that looked grey. They had mass measures that didn't match any of the breeds and their natures weren't aggressive enough or were too aggressive to match any of our existing records. We haven't been able to catch any of them long enough to log the data. Not even when they clutch."

"You do know that much of what you're telling us, Weasley, is meant to be kept from common knowledge?" Malfoy crossed his arms in front of him and leaned forward.

"Actually, none of what I've told you is considered classified." Charlie grinned, "Most of it is in dispute. A lot of officials want to deny the existence of any breeds not on the books. Some want to pretend that the wild dragons are merely former reserve tenants run loose and breeding on their own. Then there are the few who will admit that we might not have total control of the species. And even in those camps, there are differing ideas of how to deal with the issue. No one can decide if they want to acknowledge the possibility of there being more dragons out there to the public, or if they should make it classified and only available to the Minister's chosen, and of course, the people on the Reserves."

"Forgive me, but I fail to see how this pertains to Defense against the Dark arts, rather than being a Care of Magical Creatures lesson," Nott grumbled. "I've been wondering this the entire time, but you haven't moved on to any spells in any class. I felt I had to ask."

Sheepishly, the Weasley brother rubbed the back of his head, "Yeah, well, Professor McGonagall warned me about that. Trick is, if I've got a Mastery of anything it's Care of Magical Creatures. But I was the best they could find to cover this class on such short notice. My older brother's about to be tapped, because I can only cover this week, and he's working out the details to cover to the end of the year. Anyway, the best I can do to make this a defense class is to explain why dragons are so dangerous."

The dragon handler turned and faced the back wall of the room, the same direction as the students. In a few swipes of his wand, he had a reasonable representation of a dragon on the board. Harry was rather impressed by it, anyway, though Malfoy was muttering about Weasleys lacking the artistic gift given a Kneazle. After a few more gestures, there were notes all over the picture Charlie had drawn, and Harry began scribbling them down, looking up to match them to a region of the creature referenced.

"Dragons, I would hope you know by now," the redhead started, "have thick skins. So thick, in fact, that most spells are either absorbed or they bounce off. Their skin is thinner on the undersides of their bellies, along their throat, and directly around their eyes. Making those the main targets for dragon slayers. Most breeds, to add to their danger levels, have the ability to breathe fire."

"Can't that be used against them, sir?" Goyle was half-listening to the lecture and half watching Harry's attempt at a drawing of the dragon on the wall.

"In some instances, yes," the instructor was done drawing, and returned to facing the class, "Don't try using the Chinese Fireball's flame against it. Or any other dragon's flame, for that matter. They're built to defend against such things. However, if you have some kind of noxious fume or poisonous gas to use, your best choice is the

Horntail. Its internal chambers for flame production have few fail-safes against intruding chemicals. In other words, make a Horntail breathe an airborne toxin, and you'll kill it as sure as its breath could still kill you, as it might live long enough to exhale."

By the end of the class, Harry felt exhausted all over again, and it wasn't because he'd been the test dummy for a spell, for once. He'd scribbled notes as quick as he could, appending and completely reworking what he'd had the year before. Quirrell had skimmed dragons, saying they were more difficult to deal with than they were worth, and had left it at that. If the person teaching Care of Magical Creatures was going to be anything like the dragon handler, Harry would gladly sign up for it.

When the class released for lunch, the dark-haired boy wasn't sure who was more eager to leave the room: the majority of the Slytherins in the room, or the man instructing them. Shaking his head, Harry packed up his supplies and walked out. He was perfectly happy to write the essay the dragon handler had assigned, as he'd given plenty of information to use in it. Of course, if the explanation he'd given made sense the way the Second Year thought it did, Bill would be the one grading it, rather than Charlie.

When he had nearly stepped in the Great Hall, a thought occurred to Harry that he had to follow up on.

"Ch-Pr- uh, Mister Weasley?" Harry stumbled over whether to use the given name or an honorific, and not knowing which title applied. He then continued his question when he got the redhead's attention, "I just remembered reading about the fastest way to kill a basilisk. Did you or Bill ever use roosters?"

Eyes crossing, Charlie started snickering. After a few seconds, Harry got the feeling he'd said something wrong.

"I knew we'd forgotten something." Charlie muttered, "You might not have been poisoned at all if we'd just sent a contingent of roosters ahead of us. Not to mention, my little sister might not have had to spend quite as long in the Infirmary."

"But what about the book?" Harry asked, "A dead basilisk isn't going to reflexively bite at something flying into its maw."

"It's one of those give or take situations, Mister Potter," Dumbledore had walked up to the two discussing the giant reptile below the school. "As far as it goes, I should think things went well enough. No one died this time around, and there shouldn't be a next time either."

"Have you made any progress on my list of questions, Headmaster?" Harry tried not to glare, or sulk, or even meet the old man's gaze. His voice though, gave away how he felt at the moment.

"I'm still attempting to decide how to answer some of those questions while honoring secrecy laws and spells," the Headmaster cautioned, "If you will just be patient, my boy, you will learn what you asked questions about. Now, please, take your seat, your House mates are anxious for you to join them so that you may all eat."

The boy shook his head as he trekked to the Slytherin table. He felt the stares of the rest of the school, and got the feeling that his instincts had been right. The other three houses were going to pretend they'd gotten over their animosity, but would still be just watching for the first misstep, and then it would all break loose again.

Having sat and eaten most of his lunch, Harry was more than a little surprised to find shadows looming over his shoulders. Looking up, he relaxed visibly at the sight of the twins.

"Hey Harry," Fred chirped.

"Long time no see," George chimed.

The two Fourth Years had swooped down on him and hugged him, and the boy was reminded of their mother. The rest of the Slytherin table laughed as the Second Year yelped.

"Half of that was from mum, in thanks," Fred stepped back and ruffled the younger boy's hair.

"The other half was from us, also in thanks," George snickered as the Slytherin attempted to put the mess made of his hair back into a semblance of order. Hopeless as it was, "Much as we don't like how close we came to losing not one, but four siblings, at least we didn't actually lose anyone."

"I tried to get the basilisk to leave people alone, but it, uh, I think it had gone mad from being alone for so long," Harry shrugged, "Or the Heir drove it mad fifty years ago when he first found it."

"I wonder if Professor Snape is going to harvest its parts," Fred rubbed his nose. The expressions on the faces around the trio were interesting to say the least. Malfoy seemed like he was bursting to say something, but made himself wait, and Parkinson was paler than usual.

"You honestly fought a basilisk, Potter?" the girl whimpered, "They confirmed what creature it was, and that you had gone down to rescue the girl, but you fought it?"

"Not so much fought it as ran away from it hoping not to see its eyes in the reflected water," Harry sheepishly grinned.

"Didn't any of you try Transfiguring roosters?" Flint smirked, "Their cry is fatal, after all."

"No kidding?" Harry rolled his eyes, "I never thought of it, was too busy being rather painfully Gryffindor, and I suppose the elder Weasleys were too busy being bait. Don't ask me why Professor Snape never summoned any."

"Summoning them would be impossible, Potter," Wells spoke up, "You'd have had to Transfigure them from debris."

"That might have been the reason then," Harry sighed, "There wasn't really any loose stuff down there that we could have used. The place was in amazing shape for being so old and unused. Though it was a bit wet."

"A simple Blasting Curse would have fixed that," Bole chimed in.

"Ah, but who knows how stable the walls of the Chamber are?" Fred countered.

"Besides, who's to say that in its death throes from the rooster, the basilisk wouldn't have crushed Ginny?" George pointed a finger in the air, "Or it could have collapsed on her afterward, either way, she'd have died."

"And don't forget that there's no guarantee that the roosters wouldn't be dumb enough to look in the eye of the basilisk before crowing," George snickered. "Nah, as scary as it was to find we'd almost lost our triplet, we're happy with the way it worked out."

"Your triplet?" Flint hissed.

Harry groaned mentally and dropped his head to the mercifully cleared tabletop. "Fred, George, Flint, please. I'm too tired to deal with an argument right now. I need all the energy I can muster to stay awake next class, seeing as we've been shifted to having History instead of Potions."

"I have a question for H- uh, Potter," most of the Slytherins, Fred, and George, turned to glare at Hermione as she walked over from the opposite side of the room.

"Well, speak," Flint drawled, and Harry tried not to snicker. The expression on Granger's face told him that she had made the mental connection as well.

"The Headmaster informed me that even though he'd given me special permission to check out the texts on ancient magical creatures and thought to be extinct magical creatures, I'd gone too far when I didn't tell everyone why I had them." Her face held a sour look as she struggled not to look towards the Head Table to glower. "But this note I have in my hand," waving a fragment of paper that was promptly snatched away, she paused, "told me I was to keep everything I found in those books to myself."

"She is telling the truth," Landale, who'd grabbed the note, "It's even got the Headmaster's signature on it."

"So that means that rather than willfully preventing the sharing of knowledge, you were just stupid enough to take the Headmaster at face value," Derrick tossed out his thoughts on the matter. "That's fine, we'll just remember that."

"Look, I was told that if everyone knew what it was and how to fight it, they'd all go about trying to find the basilisk to kill it, and that would just result in their own deaths!" the girl whimpered.

"Granger," Harry stood, and groaned, "I don't know where you got the idea that Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, and Slytherins are going to react in the same way as Gryffindors would. When our House figured out what the creature was, the first thing we did was to tell the Professor, our Head of House, in hopes that he'd know how to take care of it without bloodshed or death. Avoiding mayhem is good too, but sometimes that's too much to ask."

Even as he snickered at Harry's attempt at a joke, Flint glowered at the Gryffindor girl. "The only reason Slytherins were involved in the extermination of that monster was because it was the only way we stood a chance of getting the rest of the school to stop looking at us like we'd been born smelling of waste products."

"Not like that's anything new," Warrington piped up, "Nor is it likely to change."

"But, you," Granger started.

"Look, Hermione, they've made their point, and stated their views on the matter," Fred began.

"You were stupid to think that they'd react the same way as members of our House would," George added.

"It's a little late now, to try and fix your mistake," Harry gathered his bag, and then looked at the rest of the Second Years, "I don't know

about you all, but I'm off to class. After all, I do have notes to catch up on."

A Time Charm later, and the four tables were packing up and heading off to classes. As much as he sounded eager, Harry really wasn't looking forward to History. On the best of days it was difficult to stay awake, but the brunet was already tired. He could only hope that the Gryffindors would be cause for enough excitement that he wouldn't fall asleep.

In the classroom, he sat down quickly, and pulled out his text, starting his note-taking process. Scribbling a few words and reading half a page was his usual rhythm, but it wasn't to be this time.

He'd made it through roughly three pages before he sat up, realizing he'd been poked in the side by Zabini. The other boy was looking at him, with a somewhat concerned expression on his face. After a couple of seconds, and a quick glance around to ensure that it was just the other Slytherin looking, Harry raised an eyebrow.

"You fell asleep, Potter," Zabini whispered, "I thought you'd like to be woken back up."

"Thanks, Zabini," Harry rubbed at his tired eyes, trying to wake himself back up. A few seconds later, he noticed the darker boy staring at what he'd written.

"You're writing notes from the book, right?" Harry refrained from any particularly unkind comments about the obviousness of that question, and let his neighbor continue speaking. "What do you want to trade, on a regular basis, for a copy of your notes?"

"You're as tired as I am of the on a case by case basis, are you?" Harry sighed. "I was rather hoping to be able to put together a study group, maybe spanning the four houses, maybe not, to help everyone with their grades. You know, so-and-so is good with Charms, so everyone will work with them, or from their notes. In exchange, since they're not so hot with Defense, the person who's best at that will be the tutor in that subject."

"How does any of that amount to an even exchange?" Crabbe asked, keeping as quiet as the other two. While Binns was mostly oblivious, they didn't want to take a chance on his using this as the one day he caught them all out.

"There are so many things in this life that aren't even remotely even exchanges," Harry shook his head, "I'm amazed everyone in our House demands them, considering what real life is like."

"Maybe that's why," Zabini muttered.

"So how does that system work with those of us raised to believe we're worthless?" Harry whispered mostly to himself.

"That's why you're in Slytherin," Crabbe gasped, "You're trying to prove you really are worth something!"

"Children, please moderate your voices," Binns scolded the small group speaking. Ironically, he was looking at the Gryffindors when he said it, as there was a cluster of them chatting as well.

Harry refused to speak for the rest of the period, taking notes resolutely, and ignoring the prodding from the others. When they were finally released, he veered off to the library as quickly as he could, and settled at a table quickly.

"Potter," the hesitant voice caught his attention because it was female, and sounded calmer than Parkinson, Greengrass, or Bullstrode. He looked up, expecting Landale, or the Seventh Year Prefect of his House, so he was surprised to see Granger. "I heard you're looking into Wizarding Custody issues."

Nodding, the boy wondered what she was up to. She dug into her backpack, and pulled out a book. Turning it to face the Second Year, she continued.

"I wondered what kind of custody rules there were when I found out I was coming here. I didn't want to be taken away from my family suddenly just because I can use magic," She fidgeted as she passed the book over. "So during one of our trips to Diagon Alley, I asked to

pick this one up. You don't have to rush to get it back to me, just give it over to the twins when you're done."

"Why are you helping me?" Harry was suspicious.

"I've overheard some of the others in Gryffindor mutter about how you're dark because you're in Slytherin. Then they jabber about your family, and I have to ask myself, if you're dark, why is it because of you being in Slytherin? Can't it be because you hate the people who treat you badly and want to get away?"

"Make your point, Gryffindor," Flint hissed at the Second Year girl as he approached Harry's table in the library.

"I- I'm just saying, if everyone's so scared of you going dark, or evil or whatever it is they're worried about, why won't they do something to prevent it?" she stuttered.

"What about you?" Harry had to ask.

She looked away, "I know you're not evil, or you'd have let Ginny die. I know that not all Slytherins are evil, or Professor Snape would more than just yell at us Gryffindors. I know that while having a bad family doesn't guarantee someone will turn out evil, not doing something to help them get away will make me feel evil."

"Are you trying to worm your way into befriending the Snakes?" Flint grumbled.

"No," she shook her head, "I just, well, I'm kind of hoping that if I can help Potter, Neville will take heart and let the rest of us in his own House help him too."

"What's wrong with Longbottom's home?" Harry asked.

"His family thought he was a Squib," Flint drawled, "Then, just before he got his letter, he showed an example of Accidental Magic, and they finally relaxed on him."

Harry blinked. He'd read about Squibs, and he'd heard from the twins that Filch was one. After a bit of thought, he told himself not to harp on it.

"Yes, Potter, we know, you don't like the bad treatment of Squibs any more than you like the way Muggle-borns are treated." Flint was grinning now.

"How is it you're sitting with me here?" Harry asked, "You never have before, Flint. I thought you had class?"

"I did, but my year's Longbottom struck in Defense and Weasley let us go early." The Sixth year chuckled.

"Neville's not that bad!" Granger yelled.

"He wouldn't be, with more confidence, anyway," Harry agreed.

"Fine, fine, I'll admit, Walters is worse than Longbottom. At least yours is a Second Year and might get better." Flint rubbed his hands together, "Walters really is hopeless."

Looking at the book Granger had set in front of him, Harry pulled it closer, "I'll look through it, and get back to you. I haven't exactly gotten a chance to look for myself in London. If it's useful, I'll have to work on that."

Nodding, the girl left quickly. Shortly after she left, Harry looked at his Quidditch captain and asked, "So why are you really here?"

"We're still not sure about the idea of leaving you alone anywhere," Flint explained, "And I wanted to know if you'd gotten clearance to practice Quidditch again."

"I did," Harry nodded, already half distracted by the book in front of him.

"Wait up, Potter, I've got one more thing to bring up to you." Flint waved a hand between Harry's gaze and the book it was pointed at.

"Okay?" Harry made the effort to look up.

"How serious are you about the study group idea?" the older boy asked.

"I want to say very, but with everyone's schedules," Harry shrugged, "Besides, ideally it would include all four Houses. But since we're Slytherins, fat chance there."

"I dunno," Flint smirked, "It sounds like you'd have Granger and Longbottom signed up already, and the twins."

"That's just four people from one other House," Harry grumbled.

"So, work at it," Flint suggested.

"You guys always talk about me having some goal or other I'm trying to accomplish. I'm just waiting for you to say something else about that," the Second Year was anxious to get back into the book he'd just been loaned.

"I personally think you're easier to get on with when you're kept too busy to do anything but the tasks assigned to you. You've finished the extra curricular assignments from the Professors, so we're going to give you new ones," the older boy stood, "Starting with this study group. Get it organized enough that it's either operational before the end of the year, or ready to implement starting next year."

"Are you-" the brunet began.

"I think you can handle that," the elder interrupted, "If you make enough progress fast enough, I might add on that you should cover more than one year, and include all four Houses after all."

As the Quidditch Captain left, Harry boggled. He was starting to think he ought to argue the assignment, asking what was in it for him, but the obvious answer was, 'people to study with for each class,' and that made his question basically moot.

He kept working at his essays from classes, and then it came time to eat, he mechanically ventured to the Great Hall. Just as mechanically, he ate the evening meal and headed for Astronomy. He was sure the other Second Years noticed it, but he wasn't going to snap out of his mental fog just to explain it to them. Not yet, at any rate.

When he collided with a First Year who appeared to be lost, Harry blinked and pulled himself back to Earth. The younger student was wearing a Hufflepuff pin on her robes and looked rather lost.

"Aren't you supposed to be in the Common Room?" Harry asked.

The poor thing looked scared, "I was on my way there, but there was this funny looking House Elf running in the hall, beating its head against things, making such a clatter, that I got distracted and took a wrong turn somewhere. I didn't think the Hogwarts House Elves beat themselves."

"Did the House Elf have on a ratty, dirty rag?" Harry tried to describe Dobby without naming him.

"Er, I think so. His clothes looked horridly foul," the girl winced at the memory. She then flinched, "My apologies. My name is Shannon Forest. I should have introduced myself already."

"I'm just as guilty of it as you are then," Harry paused, then gave her directions to the Common Room. When she seemed lost at the third turn, Harry pulled a sheet of parchment and a quill from his bag and drew a quick map for her. "There you go. Just don't lose points for your House on your way."

"Thank you," the girl wandered off, following the map.

The occasion reminded Harry of the maps he'd been working on the year before, and earlier on in the current year. He wondered, while trekking to the Astronomy tower, if he could still find the charms for his own maps in the library, even without the map the twins had shown him.

That thought reminded him of the last things he'd read from the map, and he shuddered. He didn't want to meet any of those individuals now. If they were that close-minded as teens, what would they be like now?

During Astronomy, the Professor quizzed them on the constellations they'd covered starting from break. Harry almost mixed up the names of the twins that made up Gemini, until he remembered that one had been a boxer. He briefly toyed with writing a side note on the twins raised by a female wolf whom had gone on to found Rome, but that felt rather Granger-ish. He turned in the test and wrote the note to himself to look the other set of twins up again some time.

Okay, I wrote a couple of chapters ago that Potter was being a 'pothead' and at the time simply meant to make a bad play on his name. Someone pointed out to me a rather interesting point, and I found myself thinking about it. Eh, heh. When I said 'the Pothead in my head' that could be read as either MPD or as it actually is- the muse making me write this story. My very own Harry Potter. He's rather insistent sometimes, though I think he's gotten distracted of late. You see, I'm not very far ahead of my posting at this time. I just posted chapter 20, and I'm still working on 22.

Speaking of, the next chapter, 22, and possibly 23 will likely as not all concern the same day. I could post them within the next week, starting the next 'scheduled' time to update, but then I'd have to get to 24 before I could post another 'weekly' chapter. I'm not nearly that far. I'm leaning towards posting the three over the next three weeks, even though that's awful cliffhangerish.

The next morning, Harry was woken early, and dragged out of his nice warm bed before he even had a chance to be half-awake. He woke with a sharp flinch when someone transfigured his clothes while they were still on him. That was a cold spell!

"What's going on?" Harry yelped, trying to warm himself back up.

"Quidditch," Flint smirked, "You've been given the nurse's approval for returning to practice, so we're practicing this afternoon."

"So why wake me now?" the twelve-year-old yelped.

"We're going to make sure you're at the least caught up in your homework, else you'll fall behind with the amount of practice we're going to put you through," Montague laughed.

"This isn't going to take away from OWL and NEWT studies, is it?" desperately trying to worm out of it, the boy wasn't so much concerned with subtlety as he was with results: namely success.

"That's what this is for," Bletchley nodded, "Those who are standardized test-bound will have the rest of us to quiz them, and those in-between tests, or not there yet, will take it as an opportunity to learn ahead. It's one great study group."

"Wasn't that something you were working towards?" Derrick asked.

"Flint told me it was time to start on that, but I didn't figure on getting rousted from my bed at painful hours of the morning and frozen by spells that,- just what did you do?" Harry actually looked at the clothing he now wore. It actually fit him, and he wasn't used to the sensation. It made him almost feel naked.

"Keep your shirt on Potter, it's just clothes that fit you," Bole drawled, "Though we can transfigure it back if you like"

At the leveling of the wand, Harry flinched, "No, that's fine, just one shot of freezing spells per day is fine by me, thanks." He then made to return to his dorm, but was blocked by Warrington stalking out,

leading the majority of the rest of the Second Years, and a healthy number of the Reserves for the Quidditch team.

"Now do you see why study groups don't get formed very often, Potter?" Flint nodded at the large group of students cluttering the Common Room, "They're unwieldy. It's rather difficult to ensure that each group is on time, where they're supposed to be and on task. Then you throw in the varying needs of all concerned, and you've got a true knot."

"And that's without accounting for everyone's schedules," Warrington spoke up.

"So is that all this was about?" Harry rolled his eyes, "You guys telling me that yet another of my crusades is impossible?"

"Potter," Flint sighed, "Don't you think this is an awful lot of trouble to go to just for that?"

"Not if you want to make the point as clear as possible," Harry muttered.

"Let me guess," Montague growled, "Those relatives of yours tried something like this once."

"After Hagrid left be back in Surrey, I had to ask myself if that's what my letter to Hogwarts had been," Harry unconsciously stared through a few people as he remembered, making them shiver. "Then I told myself that it was too much of an expense, they wouldn't waste money on me like that if they wouldn't-. Never mind."

"Potter!" Malfoy thumped the darker boy on the shoulder, "You'd better tell us, or it won't be useable as evidence against those lumps of flesh."

"Evidence?" the brunet's eyes were wide.

A Seventh Year explained, "Even if the Headmaster isn't putting any effort into it, a few of us have parents or other relatives in the Ministry, who'll help us to push through an investigation." Then he continued,

"We might even try for charges against those that knew about your placement but did nothing."

The Second Year thought about who all that could hurt, and paled.  
"I'm not sure that's such a good idea, after all, Professor Snape knew I was there."

"He tried to do something about it once he knew something was wrong," Flint reasoned.

"So what's to say that the others who knew were aware of what was wrong?" Harry asked.

"Dumbledore and McGonagall knew," Malfoy hissed.

"Is this really about dealing with misplaced custody, or is it about getting back at the Gryffindors for the way they've treated you all?" Harry demanded.

"Did I miss the message that indicated you all were supposed to be in the Common Room two hours before breakfast even starts?" the low drawl made everyone in the room jump and snap their attention to the owner of the voice. Professor Snape stood in the middle of the doorway leading outside of the Common Room just long enough for the students to recognize him, and then stalked in.

"Sir, we were attempting to put together a study group," Flint stuttered.

"An admirable sentiment, Mister Flint, but I have to wonder at the early hour. Some of you had Astronomy last night, and others were up rather late working on homework. Thus, I find it difficult to sanction this. All of you back to your beds." Snape shook his head at his students, "I am all for the learning for its own sake, but not at the cost of one's health. You will regret that all too soon, so don't start down that path just yet."

"Yes sir," the students filtered out and down to their rooms. Harry was rather glad to make his way to his quarters, or would have been, had the professor not rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Mister Potter, I suspect that this was somewhat done for your benefit," the Potions Master removed his hand as soon as he had the child's attention. "I'm only going to be off grounds during the day for a short while longer. As no one has told you thus far, should you have trouble, be sure to report it to the Prefects. If it proves beyond their skill to manage, you may turn it over to Professor McGonagall. She does favor her House, but your parentage actually does work for you once in a while. In all her years teaching, there hasn't been a Potter she didn't like. I've had to suggest the rest of the House go to Professor Flitwick however, so keep that in mind as well."

At the boy's nod, the Head of Slytherin walked back out of the Common Room. At the same time the Second Year headed for his room, hoping to catch some more sleep.

When it was the proper time to wake, Harry found himself stirring lazily out of bed, mostly unwilling. He'd lost a good half-hour after the Quidditch team had rousted him, and he still wasn't sure on why they'd bothered in the first place.

Still, he forced himself to be up and about, and at least in the Great Hall by the time the older Quidditch team members were. He wasn't in the slightest ashamed to admit he was using them as bodyguards, and they didn't seem to mind. After all, he'd heard the grumbles of the other three Houses, and wasn't exactly eager to see what they'd do to him by himself. Having had a hand in the rescue of Miss Weasley didn't seem to help his reputation much.

Truthfully, he'd been a sidelines part of the rescue team once they got past the doors requiring Parseltongue to activate. And who would believe that a twelve-year-old would get bitten by a Basilisk and survive? For that matter, who would believe that a Basilisk lived under Hogwarts? Not very many of the students, that was certain, though Bill, Charlie, Professor Snape, and even the Headmaster corroborated.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by Flint speaking up as soon as the group had seated themselves. "Potter, we weren't trying to destroy your hopes. We just wanted you aware of the difficulties in putting together a study group. And this is just within Slytherin. Add in the

other Houses, as if you could at this point, and you get all kinds of conflict."

"Wouldn't it be a matter of finding out who is the best in each subject, or even the top three, for each House, for each year, and getting them to commit some time to helping others study?" Harry grumbled, "Smart people shouldn't be selfish with their knowledge. They should try to help others, especially in a school like this. Who knows, tomorrow, that person who is hopeless today may be responsible for your life? I certainly wouldn't want to leave them in the dust in that case."

"What would you get out of it now?" Bole spoke between mouthfuls of oatmeal.

"Don't be so shortsighted," Montague chided the older boy, "Look at it this way. If Potter coaches Goyle and Crabbe, ensuring that they do well enough in school to not only stay, but also to go on to NEWT levels, they'll be grateful to him. At the least."

"That gratitude could be used to get him something in return later, when they're out in society somewhere," Bletchely agreed.

"If you want to look at it like that. That's your choice," Harry shook his head, "But really, I'm trying to do this because everything feels like its winding up to become a war zone again. I seem to remember that history repeats itself. Take that, and the fact that Slytherins are still treated like scum, and what do you have?"

"Well, what do you see us as having?" Malfoy plonked himself down at the table, somehow managing to do so gracefully enough that the rest of the table didn't harp about manners, as they would have if Harry had.

"A gun, aimed, primed, and loaded, just waiting for the final trigger pull." Harry muttered, "As long as you all know what a gun is, anyway."

"Oh, we've heard of those," Derrick chimed, "I remember my brother talking about those when he was in Muggle Studies. He took it because he figured it would be an easy grade, and regretted it. The Professor spoke about all kinds of strange things, and one of them was a gun. Said Muggles used them all the time."

"Who is the Muggle Studies professor?" Harry blinked.

Flint smirked, "It was a different person then. But now, it's the woman at the complete opposite end from our Head of House's seat, next to the woman in the frilly shawl with the huge glasses."

Harry looked at the woman, wondering if she had no idea what she was really teaching. Shaking his head, he responded to the statement about guns, "It's not exactly that they're used all the time. In gangs, and by police, they're frequently used, but most citizens only have them for protecting their homes and families, or to hunt wild game with. And even then, a lot of people don't have them."

"Yet another reason not to take that class," Malfoy preened, "Useless class."

"Well, if the person teaching it isn't Muggle-born or Muggle-raised, or hasn't spent any real time with Muggles, no, it's not worth the trouble."

"We'd love to continue this," Flint's tone said otherwise, "But we all have classes to get to."

The students dispersed, heading for their classes, and Harry found himself in the cluster of his Housemates before they'd gone through two hallways. While they were headed for the Herbology classroom, the Double Herbology lesson of the week was scheduled to have Gryffindors with them, and those classes had been about as calm as the Cerberus Harry remembered from the year before.

A mental pause left the boy wondering what had happened to the giant three-headed dog. He stepped into Professor Sprout's class, and dismissed the thought for now. He had to tend to an adolescent Mandrake for the period.

"Come now, all of you, fetch your earmuffs, secure them properly, and head for your tables. We've got to repot them one more time, and it will definitely take two of you to do this. They're at that willful, rebellious stage, just before they start getting acne. From there, it's only a matter of time before they start pot-hopping and we'll be ready to harvest them to restore your classmates and Housemates."

After repotting the mandrakes, the Head of Hufflepuff indicated that it was safe to remove the headgear, and she lectured on the Mandrakes at this stage. "I'm sure some of you noticed that rather than having wild Mandrakes that fought your every action, you had one that was rather moody, sullen and withdrawn. That is normal enough that you needn't worry."

A good portion of the class relaxed. She continued, "Some of the Mandrakes are from different areas, and I'm sure some of you have treated your Mandrakes very differently over the course of the year. Both will result in drastically different plants at this point. Mister Longbottom, Miss Patil, Mister Potter, Miss Parkinson, the four of you had remarkably well-behaved Mandrakes, and thus each of your houses will get ten points. It is a sign of your respect for the plants that they weren't rebelling."

She then broke the class into small groups, of five, and set them to mixing the feed that the newly repotted adolescents would need. Each team was of both Houses, and thus things were fairly quiet. Harry had the odd luck of being in the same group as both Granger and Ron, though luckily, Thomas and Finnegan were in other groups.

They had just about combined the ingredients when Ron piped up, "Potter, I wanted to thank you for saving my little sister. I've been rotten to you and you still saved her."

"You had nothing to do with the decision." Harry snapped. "It was for me, for her, for the twins, for your parents, and somewhat even for the reputation of Slytherin. You had no part in the choice, except as to be glad I could prove you wrong about thinking me the Heir."

"About that, who was it?" Granger asked.

"Why do you want to know?" Harry peered at her with narrowed eyes.

"We might be able to help you get them prosecuted and jailed, especially if they have done this before." The girl responded.

"I think it's better that the professors know. They'll have better luck in dealing with it." Harry tried to refocus on the task they'd been set to, but Ron spoke up again.

"Are you sure they're even trying? Shouldn't they have found the Heir already and started a trial against them?" the redhead demanded.

"There's already a trial against Lockhart for breaking contract, and a trial for the wrongful imprisonment of Hagrid, what else are you looking for?" Harry asked.

"I want to know that the person who framed Hagrid and nearly killed my sister is going to be in Azkaban for their crimes," Ron yelped. This caught the attention of the class at large and of Professor Sprout.

She strode toward the group and peered over their work, "As much as I appreciate your hard work and progress on the assignment, I would also greatly enjoy it if you could work quietly."

"Yes ma'am," the five children chimed, even though Goyle and Crabbe had been quiet through the conversation.

Towards the end of the class, Ron and Granger seemed to want to continue the discussion from before, and Harry wanted none of it, so he merely packed up his things and headed out of the room, quickly as he could. The rest of the Second Year Slytherins followed him, somewhat reluctantly, as he headed for their Common Room. Upon speaking the password of 'Verdad,' the brunet dashed down to the dorm and rearranged his things in his bag. He left the Herbology text on his bed, and picked up his History and Transfiguration books.

It wasn't until he returned to the Common Room that he noticed the other Second Years hadn't followed him in. Thus he stepped outside,

and met Crabbe, Goyle, Malfoy, Zabini, and Nott out in the hall. Then he looked at them, and their expressions made him worry.

"We've been standing here, and during that time, no less than three clusters of members of the other Houses have passed by." Zabini reported.

"They glare at us, and mutter," Goyle added, "Then continue on."

"We wouldn't be lucky enough for them do decide to apologize for thinking you're the Heir, Potter." Malfoy sighed, "So they can only have been up to no good."

"Why does it have to have something to do with me?" Harry asked.

Nott gently steered the smallest Slytherin to the center of the group. After a brief, nonverbal conference with Zabini and Malfoy, the other boys clustered around Harry and as a unit, they moved to the Great Hall.

Once there, they moved to the Slytherin table, meeting up with the girls of their year, and Harry was more than a little perplexed by the looks on the faces at the other three tables. The other three Houses had seemed to lay off on the idea of him being evil incarnate, but this made it seem like they'd been trying to fool him. Then the mutterings became clear.

The Headmaster had been convinced to award the House points for the rescue of the youngest Weasley, and the rest of the school was convinced that Slytherin had gotten an unfair amount. Motion out of the corner of his eye, had the brunet trying to dodge or duck, and instead, found him surrounded by the Slytherin Quidditch team at the table.

"Aw, come on," Fred whined teasingly.

"We won't hurt him, promise." George chuckled.

"After all, he is our triplet," Fred continued.

"We're supposed to believe that, the way you treat your Prefect brother and your younger brother?" Flint drawled.

"That's just good-natured fun," George grinned.

"Somehow, I doubt they'd agree," Bole was trying not to laugh, but his face gave him away.

"They shouldn't be so annoying then, should they?" Fred smiled wide.

"Are you setting him up for a prank?" Warrington got to the point.

"Nope," George's face became serious, "We just need to arrange a time to chat with him, today if possible."

Fred's face wasn't laughing any more either as he added, "And to let him know that we're still with him."

"I appreciate it," Harry's smile, though wan, was real, and the twins nodded at him, turned and moved toward their own table.

Expecting to be allowed to sit down at that point, Harry was dismayed by Montague's speaking to someone behind him, "What do you want?"

"First off, I want to thank Potter for rescuing my sister," Percy drawled, "And second, I wanted to let him know that if he needs help catching up in classes, I'll be happy to tutor him."

Harry had a sudden idea, "Just me, or could I ask for this to be a long term thing? I've heard from the twins that you like explaining things, and I know of a few people who could do with things being told to them on a regular basis."

"I get the feeling they said something more to the effect of I blather on about unimportant things all the time," the Prefect took a step back from the Slytherin table. "I suppose I could tutor students besides yourself, as long as they refrained from calling me, or my family, by any inflammatory terms."

"Which subjects are you best in?" Harry asked.

"I do well in all of them, but the ones I particularly enjoy are Charms and Transfiguration. At least, of the classes Second and First Years would have need of tutoring in," Percy nodded. "Why don't you get back to me with a list of people who need help, what in, and times they're available, and I'll find a place or places in which we can do this?"

Harry nodded quickly. He then noticed Professor Dumbledore walking toward the table from the other side of the room. Suddenly, he wondered if this was going to be against any rules.

"Mister Weasley," The Headmaster queried, "Is there a particular reason you're standing by this table?"

"I was thanking Potter for rescuing my sister, and offering to tutor him in any classes he might need help in from his stay in the Infirmary." The Sixth Year nodded respectfully to the man. Or at least, Harry was going to call it respectfully.

"If my memory serves me right, there are no rules against this," the elderly man ran his fingers through a section of his beard as he spoke. "However, do be aware that there are those who would not be happy to see this plan succeed."

"Why not sir?" Harry looked at the Headmaster's shoulder, he wasn't feeling up to meeting his eyes. "I would have figured that if anyone was going to prevent it, they'd have stormed over here to do so already, wouldn't they?"

A low murmur of chuckling was heard along his table, and that left the boy thinking to himself that he was going to find out what he'd said that was so funny. For right now, he was going to find out what Dumbledore was up to, and why his list of questions hadn't been answered yet.

"Ah, good point my boy," the professor chuckled as well, "I believe ten points are in order to Gryffindor for offering ones own time to the benefit of others."

"I was only doing so out of gratitude, sir. I think Harry fully deserved the twenty points you gave him for saving Ginny, and then some." Percy nodded to the younger boy and then paused, "I'll be returning to my table now. Remember to send me the list, will you?"

Harry nodded, then turned to look at the Headmaster again. He glanced at the others of his table, and then back to Dumbledore, saying, "You still haven't gotten the list back to me. You don't even have to answer all the questions all at once. Just to make a start on them would be nice."

"Ah, that makes the difference then, my boy," Dumbledore patted Harry on the head, and began passing him, towards the Great Table, "I believe then, that if you dropped by my office directly after classes, I could give you some of the answers you want."

"Sir!" Flint called, "That's when we've scheduled to have practice, just to make sure he's back up to form, before the next game!"

"Oh, my then," Dumbledore sighed, "I suppose then that we shall have to reschedule, won't we, Harry?"

"Y-yes, sir," Harry grumbled, sat, and began mechanically eating. He wanted to think that the Headmaster had done that on purpose, but that was a self-centered thought.

"Look, I'll work with the Headmaster about a specific time." Flint reached over to the Second Year's plate and added a sandwich that the younger couldn't get because he'd waited too long to sit. "When that's worked out, we'll have you go through practice, go to your meeting with him, and then you'll come back and fill us in on this list of questions."

"I'll just wait, thanks," Harry didn't like the terms of that deal very much, so he was going to throw it out right off.

"Don't we at least get to know what you meant by a list of questions?" Bole asked.

Harry pondered a minute, chewing on his sandwich. Finally, he decided to agree provisionally, "Some of those questions were personal, so I won't tell you what I asked, but I'll tell you that when I was in the Infirmary, I asked a bunch of questions of the Headmaster and wrote them down so I wouldn't forget. He's got the list, and is supposed to answer them."

"That'll do, for now," Flint nodded, then stood. He'd managed, in the time between Harry sitting and now to not only save food for the younger student, but to also gather and eat all of his own without looking like he'd rushed it. He walked casually to the Great Table, spoke to the Headmaster for a few minutes, and then strolled back, smirking.

Harry peered nervously at the Slytherin Sixth Year around the last bite of his sandwich. As the team Captain reached them, he spoke up, grinning. "Got that settled. We'll have practice from five to six, and he'll have his meeting with you from six to seven. You'll come back to the Common Room, and answer any questions we ask that you want to. Then its supper, and you should have some time free to chat with whichever Weasleys strike your fancy."

Squinting, Harry tried to find the loopholes in that, and then shrugged. Malfoy hissed at him, as usual, about bad manners, but Harry just half-grinned in response.

"Malfoy, he does that because it makes you mad," Bulstrode chuckled as she stood, almost in unison with Harry.

Lunch ended, and everyone who had a class dashed for it. Luckily Charms was next, rather than History so they might stand a better chance of staying awake. They headed for class, and settled into their seats. When Flitwick arrived, he looked in Harry's direction apologetically.

At the official start of class, he spoke to the assembled students in as loud a voice as his tiny body could provide which, oddly enough was still fairly quiet. "I wish to tender a formal apology to one Mister Harry Potter, for my actions the greater part of this year. It was unthinkingly rude and rather cruel of me to jump to the same conclusion of my

House. For that matter, I would love to apologize for them, but they are individuals, and I can only in that case, apologize that I did not teach them better."

Harry blinked rapidly. He knew that in this situation there was a response required of him based on whether or not he accepted the statement. The trick was, he wasn't sure of his opinion. Besides, this action on the part of the Professor assumed he knew anything about the formal rite, which, as the child was Muggle-raised, wasn't a guarantee. Finally, he sighed.

"The apology is acknowledged. It will be accepted if you truly change in your behavior," Harry had to go with that as his best option, and as he snuck glances around, meeting the gaze of his Housemates, he was relieved. They seemed approving. Even Professor Flitwick, oddly, was approving.

"That's as much as I'd hoped for," Flitwick shook his head and sighed, "Now, on to the actual class."

From there, the day more or less flew. Flitwick went over what he'd spoken of in the last class the day Harry missed, and set the students to work on that again. It was apparently fairly complicated, and thus the tiny man wasn't expecting the students to catch on in the first or even second day it would be covered. After giving it a few tries, Harry understood why. He was relieved when he heard that not even Granger had accomplished it on her first day's worth of work. She'd have said something later, he was sure.

On the way from the Charms classroom to Transfiguration, Flitwick approached the boy he'd apologized to, and handed a small sheaf of papers to him. "I took the time, while you were still in the Infirmary, after they'd turned it in, to read it. I made notes of things that you can change if you like. However, don't feel you have to. You did quite well as it is. Just know, that if you continue working with this throughout your time here, you might be able to turn it into a dissertation, and earn a Mastery in Charms shortly after graduation."

Blinking, the brunet nodded. He'd have to investigate for sure, but he personally thought that having a strong background in Charms,

Transfiguration, Herbology, and Potions would be good ideas for a Medic. Luckily, those were all classes he liked.

Transfiguration ran as per usual, except that Professor McGonagall seemed to be acting particularly careful of the child a day out of the hands of the Nurse. After a while, Harry settled into the thought, and focused on the task assigned, and on revising the paper she'd given him as he sat down.

At the end of class, the Transfiguration Professor held Harry back, and the boy was beginning to get worried. The gentle look in her eyes made him relax, even though her mouth was still as stern as usual.

"Mister Potter, as I'm sure you noticed in the paper, I suggested you continue in this vein of study. I am aware of your other assignments, so this will continue to be an extra-curricular project." The feline animagus spoke. "However, should you care to, there are formal processes one may go through to become an animagus. You've started the path."

"Don't most students start at a later age?" Harry wondered.

"There is something about your past and future that the Headmaster has requested the faculty of Hogwarts to not relay to you. Many of us disagree with this. As well, we disagree with his actions in general towards you." She explained, "Thus, we have given you these projects which are above and beyond even Third Year work. Perhaps, by the time you reach the year in which these subjects originate, you will be working at a NEWTs level of skill."

"Why can't I know why you're pushing me?" Harry demanded.

"Because of an oath the Headmaster asked us to take." Here, she practically grinned. If Harry had believed her capable, he would have said she was about to purr like the cat that got the canary, "You have a conversation with him tonight, demand the answers. If he denies them of you, we can take action. For now, you would be best served moving on to Quidditch Practice. Much as she stands no chance, I'm sure Miss Seelie would be truly upset to win simply because you had gotten out of shape."

Harry snorted as he left. Even if he did get off his game, she wouldn't stand a chance. Not that the upcoming game was versus Gryffindor. Hufflepuff's Seeker seemed like he might be the best of the other three. Harry nodded in respect to the professor as he left, and ventured to the Common Room to drop off his class supplies.

Once outside, the team performed their warm-ups, and drills. Harry spent a -to him- rather painful amount of time dodging Bludgers, and wanted to bat them back at Derrick and Bole. Especially since Malfoy was simply pointing and laughing. Finally, Flint seemed appeased by Harry's recovery and released the younger boy to his meeting with the Headmaster.

As he headed to the office in question, Harry laughed at Malfoy's expression. Apparently, the blond hadn't expected that practice would continue after the Seeker's departure. With a 'Our reserves need to keep up to par too,' Flint had grinned sharply as he directed Derrick and Bole to target him just as fiercely as they had Harry.

Though thankful that Flint had provided instructions on how to find the Gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's office, Harry did wish the older boy had given the password. The Quidditch captain had only grinned and said, 'The old man seems to like Muggle candy.'

A few minutes after arriving, Harry began to wonder if he should just begin reciting all the Muggle candies he knew. He'd gone through Reese's Pieces, Mars, Snickers, Milky Way, M&Ms, and Dum Dums when the Headmaster arrived in the hall behind him.

"Oh! Sir," Harry hesitated, "I thought you were in there, and Flint forgot to give me the password."

"Ah," nodding, the old man passed the child, and spoke to the stone statue, "Heath Bars. Though I might look into that last candy you listed. If you would explain them on the way up?"

The boy blinked as the Headmaster stepped on the staircase and it began revolving. After a few seconds, Harry stepped on a step behind the former instructor, and was carried along as well.

"Um, Dum Dums are lollipops, spherical in shape, but for the stick that juts from the bottom. And the band wrapped around their middle. They come in all kinds of flavors, like strawberry, grape, and the like. At least, that's what I've seen in the other kids' bags at Halloween parties at school. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon never allowed me to participate. It was one of the few things they refused to let Dudley take part in either."

Reaching the top of the stairs, the pair stepped off, and the Headmaster waved the child to a seat. "I'm aware of the faculty feeling discomfort at the thought of this discussion, thus I allowed for it to be as late as it is, to give time for-

"Headmaster," Professor Snape stepped up to the top of the stairs, "You haven't already begun, have you?"

"Ah, no," waving the dark-haired man to a seat, the Headmaster withdrew a metal tin from his desk, and popped its top off. "Lemon Drops?"

Both brunets in the room refused, polite as they could.

"As I was saying, I allowed this meeting to be so late so that Professor Snape could make it." Dumbledore spoke around the candy in his mouth, "There seems to be a great deal of nervousness at allowing me to speak with you by ourselves."

"Considering that one of the last times you were alone with him you modified his memories, I should think the disquiet is justified," the Potions Master hissed.

Sorry folks, but I felt I had to break this one up. It's not exactly a cliffhanger, as there's just the rest of the night to get through, but much as I whine about short chapters, I also don't like writing long ones. At least, not too often. This one has the potential to get painfully long (for me), and seeing as how far behind I am at this point, I'd like to get this done. Besides, if the review count flows like I think it will, the next chapter could get posted before the next week is over anyway.

"I honestly meant no harm in my actions," the Headmaster steepled his fingers in front of his nose, just above his beard, "I was merely afraid that with the memories intact, our Mister Potter would find himself overwhelmed by any number of emotions."

"What makes you think I'd be overwhelmed?" Harry tried not to fidget.

"Slytherin House, while immensely supportive, has long been known to produce, and cultivate those with dark tendencies." at the sharp glares from the two across from him the former Transfiguration Professor quickly added, "Not evil, merely dark. Many of the children that find themselves sorted into that House are those predisposed to following darker paths. This leads them to be more easily persuaded by those like Voldemort."

"Is that all?" the boy mumbled, trying to ignore his Head of House's flinch.

"The Potter family has never produced a Slytherin child before, and it concerns me to see Harry sorted into that House," the old man seemed even older as he responded.

"Finally, you admit it," The Potions Master growled.

"It is not a bias against your House, Severus, it is merely a caution I've had to learn to behave with," attempting to restore some degree of cheer, Harry supposed, the Headmaster added, "After all, haven't you been trying to coach me into acting more sedately during your entire tenure?"

"Sure it isn't," Harry grumbled, "If Fred or George had approached you last year, saying they thought Quirrell was using Lee as the favored test dummy, you'd have stepped in right off the bat! Not to mention, why store the Philosopher's stone in the school at all? Were you trying to encourage the man to go bad, or were you aiming that recklessness inducing forbidden treasure at Gryffindors?"

"Hogwarts is one of the safest places in all of Wizarding Britain, my boy," rubbing his eyes, the Headmaster sighed, "I figured that it would

be safest here, of all places. I was quite saddened when I discovered my mistake."

"So you've admitted you were mistaken in regards to the Stone, why not admit you were wrong about the Dursleys?" Harry groaned.

"I sent someone to speak with them, and received no indicator of abuse," the Headmaster leaned forward, "Harry, please, why are you demanding we believe this?"

"It's true!" Harry yelped, "If you're talking to them, of course they'll say it's not, and when you send me back, like I'm sure you're determined to, they'll just let me have it for having said anything! And it'll be worse because they'll know you don't believe me! Why is it okay for them to feed me only what's left over? To lock me up and call me worthless? How is it acceptable for them to expect me to do all the work around the house, while their son is so spoiled, he's growing horizontally instead of vertically!"

"That could just as well be due to a Muggle health disorder, Harry, so don't hold that against him," the eldest in the room cocked his head to his left.

Harry remembered teatime at the Dursleys and had to ask, "Did the Dursleys serve tea while your person was there?"

"Why do you ask?" the Headmaster needed clarification.

"Well, whenever Vernon and Dudley were both around, tea time consisted of the required tea service, plus a few sandwiches." Harry mimed a stack that stood off the table at a distance, "A sampling of snacks, and sometimes even an extra bit of chocolate drenched thing or two. Rather like - oh wait, that's probably a Muggle book, so you wouldn't know it."

"Petunia and Vernon were recorded as being there, eating what appeared to be a late breakfast, or early lunch," papers on the man's desk were shifted, "but the individual I sent to investigate was not exactly invited to partake."

"That must have been tea time." Harry nodded, "Chances are, if Dudley had been there, it would have looked like late breakfast and early lunch all at once. It's a good thing Uncle Vernon does as well at Grunnings as he does, or he'd never be able to afford the amount he and Dudley eat, on their own. So really, I shouldn't be surprised to have to sneak the bits that fell off the plates, should I?"

"We're getting more than a little off-topic, this was regarding the Dursley's abuse," the Potions Master redirected.

"There has yet to be proof provided that there was actual abuse," Dumbledore sighed.

"Isn't there some way for courts to see my memories?" Harry begged, "Or to make it so I can't lie, even if Veritaserum is illegal for use on minors without guardian consent?"

Harry would have laughed if he recognized the frozen faces for what they were. As it was, the boy sighed, and asked yet another question that had occurred to him through the conversation, "Did Dudley ever show up when they were chatting with the Dursleys about me?"

"Why would that make a difference?" the Headmaster was puzzled.

"Surely you've heard the phrase 'little pitchers have big ears,' by now, sir?" Harry was trying not to whine, but it was blessedly difficult to keep that tone from his voice.

"What to the size of portrait ears have to do with it?" the elderly man raised an eyebrow as Professor Snape sighed.

"It is a Muggle saying that regards the ears of children as capable of hearing that which their parents might not wish them to. Especially when it concerns the repetition of what has been heard at the most inopportune moments." The Potions Master contributed to the conversations some more. "I suspect Mister Potter is attempting to indicate that had his cousin been there, the boy would have spoken up about the truth of the matter, much to the embarrassment of his parents."

"I almost don't want to ask this, but Professor Dumbledore, why are you so determined to believe the Dursleys over me?" Harry felt like curling into the chair, but his insecurity on the matter would thusly be betrayed, according to the older Slytherins.

A rather long pause ensued, as a tea set was conjured and offered around. Harry and Professor Snape both declined, and Dumbledore poured himself a drink. Then he sighed. With a rustle of his robes, and the chinking of the cup as he picked it up, the old man took a long draw from his tea. After swallowing, he began. "I am the one responsible for your placement with the Dursleys, thus the fault lies with my judgement. I am used to the occasions of being proven wrong, but that does not make each instance any easier to bear. I had hoped, that even though rumors of her distaste for magic abounded, Petunia would see past that to the beautiful, innocent child you were, and would love you accordingly. However, according to your, ah, statements, this would not be true. I truly was hoping that blood would run thicker than water."

"And?" Harry prodded.

"And your mother's actions created the opportunity to ensure your safety from the machinations of Voldemort," Dumbledore paused for another mouthful of tea, and Harry blinked, "Her love for you created a protection that will disallow him from making contact with you."

"Surely there's more than that, sir?" Harry was trying to figure out how his mother's love was any different than that of the love of all other mothers out there, ones whose children were surely killed by Death Eaters all the same.

"When you are older I will explain," Dumbledore reached for a sheet of parchment.

"Sir, I need to understand this, so I can explain it to my Housemates later." Harry tried not to look up. He wasn't sure if he was happy with this thought or not, but he found he had to use it, "Some of them are determined to level charges against you for placing me with the Dursleys, even against advice."

"Oh my," another pause as more tea was drunk, "I do believe I can defend myself in that arena, my boy, but you have my thanks for your concern."

"Actually sir," Harry really hadn't wanted to have to say this, but he also wanted the Headmaster to understand how serious the problem was, "I'd rather know myself why my mother's love for me was so special, really. After all, how many other mothers have died trying to protect their babies, and had different results from my mother's actions?"

"This is one time where the Muggles have it right," the old man sighed, "Ignorance will be bliss, and there is no forgetting what you will have learned."

"You're set on returning me to the Dursleys," Harry repeated what he'd said earlier, and again, was not gainsaid, thus confirming the statement, "So I figure I should at least know why it's so important."

"Hogwarts has some of the best wards in the world, my boy," the Headmaster started.

"Which ward did you use, Headmaster?" Professor Snape interrupted.

"Lily's willing sacrifice started the ward, and Petunia accepting Harry into her home completed it," the phrase was just cryptic enough that Harry had to rethink the words. He'd heard already that his mother had died when she needn't have. That had been explained after the first time that his occasional nightmares woke the others in the Second Year rooms. He was lost in thought enough that he almost missed the next part of the argument.

"How can you be sure that such a ward will protect against Death Eaters as well as their master? Snape hissed.

In a scolding tone, Professor Dumbledore countered, "The Dark Mark, I presume, is a piece of his magic, and will suffice to prevent their entry, should they find Number Four Privet Drive, in Little Whinging, Surrey."

Tipping his head slightly, the Portions Master responded, "I will test that theory. What alternative will you acknowledge should the ward fail?"

"There is none. The blood that flows through Harry's veins is that of Petunia's sister. That is the only protection strong enough." The response left the boy wanting to know what protections he could look forward to that would act against his mother's sister, brother-in-law, and their son. He didn't dare speak up, as he got the feeling that the two adults would completely stop speaking if they remembered his presence.

"You keyed those magics to blood? The wards are notoriously finicky, depending on emotion, intent, and regular renewal to maintain in the first place. Tying them to blood-", The Head of Slytherin began a rant, but Harry had to speak up, or he'd never understand what kind of renewals were necessary for these wards.

"Renewal?" the boy looked at both adults, as the Headmaster's gaze suddenly jumped to him, and the younger of the adults seemed to smirk while the elder's gaze was elsewhere.

A heavy sigh from the former Transfiguration Professor, and he began to explain, "The individuals to be protected by a blood ward must reside in the location designated for at the absolute minimum of a month out of each year to benefit from its power."

"Not to mention the regular sacrifice of blood," Snape's statement made Harry's memory snap to the times that Dudley would whine about his mother and father making him wait to be bandaged up. He also remembered the times that Uncle Vernon grumbled about papercuts in the house.

A second or two of wondering about Aunt Petunia's blood shed, and Harry suddenly recalled the health classes of a few years ago, when they explained the differences between girls and boys, and he stopped that line of thought on a hair, and veered off in happier directions. Like the discomfort on the Headmasters' face, as the elderly man tried to appease the thought of intentionally allowing

Harry to come to harm by stating, "Young children often get cut in play, so it is of no matter, is it?"

"The blood I shed in that house was always from Dudley pummelling me, being shoved into things with sharp corners, or cooking accidents. I do hope those wards weren't requiring that the one losing the blood volunteer to have it lost." The boy drawled. "I wasn't ever allowed to play."

"Harry," Dumbledore's voice was old and frail, and sad. A deep sigh followed, "I do not feel comfortable discussing the wards around your home in the hearing of such young ears."

"They're wards you had me live with for eleven years, and ones you intend to send me back to," Harry grumbled, "Why shouldn't I get to hear about them? After all, maybe we can come up with something to protect me from the Dursleys while we're talking."

"I do not want to attempt to bring charges against them without proof," the Headmaster breathed deeply, "Especially as the only way to level the charges properly, their being Muggles, would be to press charges in the usual Muggle fashion. Therefore, such things as Veritaserum or Pensieve testimonials will not apply."

"You think I don't know that?" the boy yelped, "If you'd just let me go somewhere else, there wouldn't be a problem! Before the incident with the House elf, I'd gotten a deal worked out with them. They'd allow me three meals a day, a room to sleep in, school supplies, and the like in exchange for the chores."

"What about the funds allotted to their account at the beginning of each month?" Snape hissed. "Surely they didn't need to be frugal with the monies they were receiving for raising you."

"I didn't dare authorize such a transfer of funds," Professor Dumbledore spoke around his teacup, "After all, to do such a thing would raise suspicion in the Ministry as to why. That would have led to an investigation, and they then would have found Harry's address."

"So the Ministry doesn't know where I live?" Harry asked.

"They do, however it is kept mostly quiet, as drawing attention would not be a good thing." The Headmaster nodded.

"Then what's to stop someone who was determined from investigating?" the boy wanted to know.

"Ah, is a simple matter of no one wanting to draw attention to themselves any more than we want attention drawn to you." The white-bearded individual paused, then continued, "For that reason, I must ask you not to send any more missives to Mister Malfoy's father."

"Sir?" Harry blinked, "What has that to do with any of it?"

"Lucius Malfoy was a Death Eater, one of Voldemort's followers, and it was never completely ascertained as to which side he stood for." Dumbledore motioned toward the teapot and cups once more, and Harry shook his head again.

Harry just looked at the man behind the desk. He wasn't going to say a thing in response.

"Slytherin has long been the House for those with ambition, cunning and the wherewithal to make plans and to see them through, come what may. Over time, that has been warped into a negative thing, as viewed by the public. Especially of late, the children of that House, for one reason or another, have found themselves living with the ambition of proving themselves to the world as being as good or better than the rest." The Headmaster sipped his tea, pausing in his oration, "It is this outlook that led Tom Riddle, the best known Heir of Slytherin, to drive himself to madness. A state which also led him to form a band of blood-purists together, in order to make his point."

"Which is?" Harry had a suspicion, but wanted the old man's opinion for once.

"What it is exactly, I'm sure we'll never know, but over time, he has become known as Voldemort." The evasive statement got the boy's defenses up again.

"So he got a bunch of blood-purists together, that must be the Death Eaters, since you spoke of them earlier," Harry puzzled, "but none of my Housemates recognized the name Riddle."

"Ah they wouldn't," Dumbledore pointed abstractly in the air.

"Wait, in the Chamber, the ghost in the diary called himself the Heir of Slytherin," Harry continued, "So if he's the Heir, but his name is unfamiliar... Sir? He wouldn't have been a Pureblood, would he?"

"No, he was not." Harry wondered if the old man was proud or saddened by his catching on. The expression didn't give that away.

"I can't help but think that if the rest of the Wizarding world would quit expecting the Slytherins to go bad, they'd be less likely to." The boy grumbled, "Not to mention, do you know how many students complain about how unfair Professor Snape is, when the other Professors do much the same thing, only against the Slytherins?"

"After so many generations of Slytherins gone down that path, one cannot help but view it in that manner," the Headmaster responded.

"I'm not going to be able to change your mind, and I won't let you change mine, sir, so I'll just return to the other questions on my list," the Second Year sighed, "Can you answer as to how Quirrell and Lockhart got to the positions they did? For that matter, though I have no issues with him, how has Charlie gotten to teach Defense?"

"Professor Quirrell, my boy, was our Muggle Studies professor two years before you arrived here. He went on sabbatical the year after that, and as we'd filled his former position, the easiest place for him to fall into afterwards was as you have experienced." The former Transfigurations professor answered, "He was fully certified in the former subject, and was at least partially licensed for the latter. As for Mister Lockhart, no one knew he was not actually a skilled Defender against the Dark."

A brief pause while the tea was drank to the bottom of the cup, "And at the same time, I am only in charge of sending in the applications

with notations as to whom I think would best suit. The ministry has final approval."

"Oh." The child found himself more or less speechless on that subject.

"As sad as it is to say, the hour we allotted to this conversation has passed, and I do believe it is time for you to return to your Common Room," the Headmaster stood, "I will continue to study your list of questions, in efforts of getting answers for you."

Harry wanted to say something along the lines of 'considering you weren't very informative this time, I am not counting on much' but figured it was smarter to keep his mouth shut. "Sir, I don't know if it counts for much, but the Dursleys locked me in Dudley's second bedroom with the window covered by metal bars. This was after a House Elf decided to try to 'save' my life by casting a hovering charm on a dessert my relatives were serving guests."

"A House elf, you say?" the sudden gleam in the elderly man's eyes made the green-eyed child nervous, "I will look into that as well."

The Potions Master escorted his Second Year charge down the stairs and through the halls. They quietly made their way to the dungeons. When they made it that far, Professor Snape spoke up, "You had to make a deal with the Dursleys for your school supplies, Mister Potter?"

"Yes sir," Harry sighed, "I figured it was better that I barter like I do here than to listen to them call me worthless as I do all the chores anyway. I'd really like to do something about getting them paid, while we're at it."

"And just why would we want to do that?" the adult's voice dropped a notch or two in timbre.

"Because along with someone sitting down and explaining to them what was going on, if they had been getting paid to take care of me all this time, I might have fared better," the boy shrugged, "But that's just my opinion."

"Had you any intention of telling us about this?" Flint spoke from just outside of the Common Room.

"I figured I didn't have much choice, what with having made contact with Mister Malfoy during the summer about custody," the Second Year rubbed the back of his head, "But I rather hoped I could keep things from blowing to pieces just yet."

"And why is that?" the Quidditch Captain demanded. "Surely you didn't want to cover up for them?"

"No, I just wanted to wait until I had something more concrete than my own accounts, and one instance of being locked up. Especially since the Ministry has 'my' magical outburst on record." Here the younger boy mimed quotes around the word 'my,' and then shrugged, "Though I couldn't stop myself from hoping the Headmaster would find somewhere else to send me over the summer."

"We will work on that, Mister Potter," the Slytherin Head of House smirked, "After all, there are wards that need testing. Should they fail, there is more ground for having you moved."

The three had moved into the Common Room by now, which left the conversation open to more interruptions, such as when Malfoy drawled, "There is still the option of finding out who exactly has Wizarding Custody of you."

"Gr. That was one of the questions I don't dare ask the Headmaster," Harry grumbled.

"Why not?" Goyle asked.

"Because if the Headmaster isn't formally declared my Guardian, and feels it's his duty to be, he'll get it remanded to himself and I'll be just as out of luck as I am now, or worse."

"Since he really will have the power to dictate your life." Bletchley added. "And now, more than ever, I see why you were working so urgently, yet secretly."

"Is there any way to get hold of my parents' wills?" Harry asked on a lark.

"You'd have to find your way to Gringotts', and I highly doubt the Headmaster will be giving you the clearance for that any time soon." Zabini sighed. "And it's hardly as though we'd be allowed a look, either."

Harry vaguely noticed that the Potions Master had left the room, and then an idea occurred to him. If he could just find a way to make it profitable in the eyes of the others, it just might work.

"Okay, Potter, that look on your face says, 'I have an idea, it just needs refining and carrying out.' So share," Flint chuckled.

"I'm still trying to figure out how to not be beholden to the lot of you for this," the boy mumbled. If he asked Gringotts' directly, he might be able to get his custody question answered. He'd have to make sure that the Headmaster didn't get wind of his plan, but,-

"Potter, share your plan, you can't work out all the kinks by yourself, you know," Bletchley was trying not to laugh at the expression on the Second Year's face.

"Well, I just wondered if it was possible to send a letter direct to Gringotts'?" the brunet asked.

"It is, but you'd have to prove it's really you before they'd consider releasing anything to you," Bole raised an eyebrow.

"I know just how to do that," Harry grinned, and then added, "After I got my answer back, I'd need help making sure that Professor Dumbledore doesn't butt in as I try to get my Guardian instated or changed."

"More than that, you'll need help keeping him from nosing in on your mail," Flint smirked. "Right about now, I don't think I'd be surprised to see him monitoring anything you send with your owl."

"Right about now, I'd be willing to lend you my owl for a few more hours worth of help in researching the lycanthropic laws," Bletchley offered.

"And I'd be glad to help distract the Headmaster from your efforts on changing your Guardian, in exchange for the satisfaction of having got one over on the old man," Flint sneered.

After a little discussion, most of the details of Harry's plan were worked out. The group got so into the conversation that almost as a whole, they jumped wildly when Landale cleared her throat and said, "Aren't you going to supper?"

Finally got this one written. The third/final part of this was finished night before last. If I combined the parts I would have about 25 pages. That's longer than anything else I've ever written, and I think a little wordy. Besides, this series seems to be mostly chit-chatting anyway, so I figured it was better to break it up.

The Muggle book was meant to be a rather pointed reference, and I knew what it was when I first started this chapter. Almost two weeks later, and I'm just finishing, but I have no clue what the reference was any more.

As to Dumbles and the blood wards. My opinion on the two is rather strange. I can see the Headmaster as the manipulative monster people write him as, yet at the same time I can see him as the person who did what he did honestly with the hopes that things would turn out right. The reason for this is that he was effectively the leader in a war. One thing I know about wars is that there are nasty decisions that have to be made, sacrifices that have to be suffered, and the person who makes those decisions has to live with the moral dilemma they leave behind. No, it's not fair that Harry suffers as the sacrifice, but I doubt that Dumbledore just went on his merry way after learning of the confirmed suffering. And the blood wards struck me as something that no one knew much about, or maybe Hermione would have researched them.

Thus, in my definition of them, they still require 30 days of cohabitation. I really think the blood 'sacrifice' would have been a

simple thing, as children really do get hurt often, and even paper cuts are common. That would have been the thought in Dumbledore's mind as he accepted the risk of it. If someone feels that I need to flesh out either point, let me know, will you? Again, I don't see the Headmaster as evil, and for all that, there will be consequences for his mistakes.

"Well, to completely change the subject," Bole smirked as the cluster in green and silver passed members of the other Houses, and ignored the glares, "What exactly is the point of Weasley-dee and Weasley-"

Harry sputtered, "You've read that book?"

"Thought it was a Muggle piece, didn't you?" Malfoy smirked.

The dark-haired boy refrained from responding. He was saved by Derrick's retort of, "He was Muggle-raised, of course he didn't know that that loon had published the book trying to inform them of our existence."

"How exactly does that work?" Harry asked. "That's, it's,-"

"The girl, Alice was a nickname for his niece," Warrington contributed, "He wrote about her favorite Magical creature, the Jabberwocky, and like a fool, didn't keep a proper eye on the poem. A Muggle spotted it and next thing you know we've got Ministries trying to cover it back up."

"Luckily, someone spread the rumors of it being a mathematical fiction or something like that, and they decided to love it to pieces." Flint chuckled.

"Oh." The brunet Second Year blinked.

"As I was saying, what's the point of those two claiming you as their triplet?" Bole poked his finger to within inches of the shorter student's nose.

"Emotionally, I guess, they've adopted me, and frankly, I'd rather be the triplet for them, than Ron's twin," shrugging and looking at the twins in question, he missed the shudders given by the rest of his House.

"Good point, Potter," Flint gently steered his Seeker to a seat at the Slytherin table.

Everyone settled in to eating. Luckily, the other Houses seemed content to feed their faces at this point in the day, rather than glaring at a green-eyed Slytherin. It was quiet enough that Harry actually finished a meal this time, before it was disrupted.

"Wood, what are you doing here?" Flint half-snarled at the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain.

"I heard Percy was offering to tutor Potter in specific, but was willing to take on other students. I just thought I'd offer the same. I'm better in Defense and Transfiguration, but I'm a passable teacher when it comes to Astronomy." The Sixth Year responded. "I'm a bit on the busy side, but the list shouldn't be too hard to work out."

Harry's eyes narrowed, "I go almost two years trying to put this together, and get nothing. Now all of a sudden, after Flint tells me I have to anyway, people are trying to help?"

"Er," Wood blinked, "I didn't know it had been assigned. I just knew that Percy had offered to help, and since he can't help in all the classes," a shake to the older boy's head, "Then he mentioned the possibility of it being for others as well. If there's one thing about Percy to worry about, it's that he tends to try and take on more than he can handle."

"What's next, the Captains of the other teams?" Bole muttered.

"I can ask them for you if you like," the laughter in the lilting voice almost made Harry laugh.

"No, that's fine," the Second Year rolled his eyes, "At least leave me some of the leg work to do for myself, or they'll say something like, 'you can't say it's done because you hardly did any of the work.' And nothing's more annoying than that, believe me."

The older boy nodded as he turned to leave. A quick look around said that no one else was approaching the table, and so Harry felt it safe to sit.

"What is it about you, Potter that has so many people wanting to help you?" Malfoy grumbled.

"If I knew, I'd have tried to use it back at my relatives' house," Harry was serious, but most of the others took it as humorous enough to joke. Remembering the Headmaster's reaction to the mention of the House Elf, the boy felt he had to ask, "How many families have House Elves?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Derrick was visibly confused.

"Well, I told you that a House Elf had shown up at where I live during the summer and used a Hovering Charm that I was blamed for, right?" Thanks to the nods from the Second Years only, he realized they'd been the only ones he'd told, "Ur, well, he gave me his name, told me why he'd done that, and held my mail. That alone made me wonder, and then all the odd events after made it worse. I mean, he said he was trying to keep me away from Hogwarts, because it wasn't safe. Then the passage between Platforms nine and ten is closed, then a Bludger goes mad. So-

"You think that House Elf might be behind some of it?" Flint blinked, "It's not impossible. But if the Master of that Elf wants to see you hurt, its going against orders."

"Oh yeah," Harry nodded, "It was all kinds of confusing watching the little guy tell me something, only to turn around and try to slam his hand in my dresser, or to clock himself with a door."

"Hm," the older students looked at each other, as the Second Years did much the same. They continued eating, now in silence, for a few minutes. At about the time that Harry figured they'd dropped the subject, Zabini spoke up.

"You wouldn't happen to be able to describe the House Elf would you?" the darker boy's eyes were narrowed.

"Er," Harry tried to recall the creature from Privet Drive, "I'd say he only stood up to my waist, so he was pretty short. His ears stuck out

at least half a foot from his head, I guess it would be parallel to his shoulders, hunched as they were. His eyes bulged out like a frog's, and were a bit wild, though I think they might have been blue. His skin was pale pinkish, wrinkled so much that I thought his wrinkles had wrinkles, and his arms and legs were twiggy. You know how you all joke about my knobby knees, well his are worse. Speaking of which, his name was Dobby."

Dryly Flint commented, "Up until you mentioned his name, that sounded just like every House Elf I've ever seen."

"Oh," Harry wondered if the others would say the same about goblins, and wondered if there was a way to teach them the differences.

"There you go again, Potter," Bletchley smirked, "Thinking up things I'm not sure we want to know."

"Is the way the House Elves here are dressed normal, or not?" the Second Year asked.

The general consensus in response to that was that they'd never seen the Hogwarts House Elves, so they couldn't be sure. In response, Harry wondered about the general treatment of the House Elves their families had, and they were so caught up in the conversation, that the huff that sounded behind the table sent all of them into a flurry of action. Harry was surprised by the number of students suddenly crowded around him, and the person who had huffed was just as shocked by the three Quidditch players suddenly in her face.

"Er, Potter," Granger hesitated visibly. Flint's glower was usually enough to scare people, but team that with Warrington, Landale, and the female Seventh Year Prefect, Lochner, and it made for a scary sight. He felt that her perseverance only proved the know-it-all was suited for her House. "I came over to ask if the book I lent you was of any use. I incidentally heard you all discussing House Elves. How can you so calmly speak of owning another sentient being?"

"Granger, I don't know what you're thinking, but stop it," Lochner snapped, "It's a mutually beneficial contract between the two species.

Some families have forgotten the roots of it, and take the subjugation aspect too far, but that's no reason to call the rest of us inhumane."

"They're sentient!" the bushy-haired girl stamped her foot.

"The contract states, and I quote, ' House Elves will bind themselves willingly, to serve unto dismissal through the gift of clothing or death, a Wizarding family. This will benefit the Wizards, in that they can conserve time, magic, and planning needs for tasks less mundane than home maintenance.' Bletchley's eyes were half-closed as he recited from a book he and Harry had found shortly before the Chamber incident. "The benefit for House Elves lies in the protection of the family being granted to them, the convenient access to House magics, and it will deter predators from eating their young.' End quote."

The girl blinked. "Which book did you find that in?"

Sighing heavily, the Slytherin Keeper pulled the text from his bag, and showed her the cover, "I'll be turning it in to Madame Pince the day after tomorrow. You can check it out then."

"I'll do that," the girl blinked rapidly, then spoke to Harry, "Let me know if you need more information, will you?"

"Forgive me if I don't quite trust you," Harry sighed, "I did last year, and look what happened.

Granger tinged pink, and shakily nodded, "Okay. Well, I suppose I deserved that. I just thought that the twins' research should be something the Headmaster knew about, so the pranks didn't go too far."

"They aren't idiots," the boy hissed, "They might pretend to be, but they aren't stupid. None of their pranks are meant to hurt anyone. They might pull one that pinches someone's ego, but that's only to deflate it down to manageable levels. The only people they might have ever consciously hurt, to my knowledge are Percy and Ron. I should hope you know why."

She stammered.

"And people wonder why we want to call him our triplet," Fred grinned.

"He knows our minds better than any of our other brothers," George chuckled.

Granger's eyes showed the whites all the way 'round as she dashed for her Table again.

"Did you want to meet in the usual place, Harry?" George looked at the Second Year surrounded by his Housemates.

"Or are we going to find a new locale?" Fred was busy sneaking glances at the Potions Master, and their actions told Harry what they wanted to do.

"I think we should stay put." Reluctantly the younger boy suggested, "If nothing else, because if we stay there, the Professor you're worried about won't take it as a challenge from us. If we move, he might."

"You mean us moving might make him figure we have something to hide," George voiced his take on it, nodding.

"More than we actually do have," Fred sighed, then nodded, "Okay. We'll stay. At least we know how to change passwords."

Flint grunted, "Don't count on that as your protection. If you're worried about our Head of House, you should know he's good at discovering passwords."

A raised eyebrow from each of the 'triplets' had the Quidditch Captain flash between paling and blushing. After a brief pause, a thought occurred to the youngest, and thus Harry said, "You know, I don't want to know. Not with the joke you told last year that I incidentally told to its subject. I think I'm better off not knowing."

The Sixth Year recovered, and smirked, "You told him? How'd he react?"

"Hardly at all, really," the Second Year answered, "He, Percy, and was her name Clearwater? All flinched and commented on your jokes only getting worse as you get older."

"Do they think I'm not trying?" the burly youth chortled, then grinned, "I'll just have to dream up one that's worse, and get you to relate it."

Mumbling under his breath, Harry stood from the table, gathering his things. He followed the twins to their not-quite-so-secret-anymore room, where they'd more or less converted all the prank materials into research. They did still have that one prank they wanted to pull, but right about now, making their own map had higher priority. Frankly, even creating the candies to allow lazy students to sneak out of classes had higher billing. Especially as some of those could be used in the prank itself. Which got the youth to thinking even more about those candies.

"So which of those candies were we going to work on next?" Fred's words made the brunet jump mentally, since he'd been about to ask just that.

"We've got the Nougats and the Peanutes worked out." George blinked, "I thought we were still working on the Pastilles?"

"Were we?" Fred looked at his twin.

While the two bantered, the shortest of the three dug around in their notes. After a bit of searching he found the page they'd left off at. "Well, for one thing, I know someone's been in here. The pages are out of order. For another, we were working on the Migraine Mashes. After realizing that the person who ate the Pastilles would have to eat something else to counter it, we decided to wait a bit on them."

"Really?" George scratched his head, "I could have sworn we'd figured on setting the Pastilles to only cause stomach upset for five minutes. Usually about the time it takes to get out of the classroom and a ways down the halls."

"I'm not finding the notes page on it," Harry called back, still poring through the pile. "You two didn't come in here and upset the organization, did you?"

"No!" Fred winced, "Not after the last time you snarled at us for it."

"We might have to waste today getting the papers back in order." The youngest New Marauder muttered. "The piles are completely trashed."

"I wish we dared say something about it." George whimpered.

"Do we at least have copies?" Fred asked.

"We do, but I'd rather not have to open those. We said we were keeping them for patenting purposes, remember?" Harry responded, having moved to another pile.

"No other copies besides that?" Fred sulked as he started in on a pile.

"Not that I know of." The Slytherin sighed.

By the time they had finished searching the piles of papers that were normally neatly labeled, the boys knew something was wrong. Not only were their notes on the Pastilles and the Mashes gone, but the pages concerning the cancelled prank had vanished, and even the observations Harry had made about the Dursleys were missing.

"Who would want those?" the orphan scratched behind his ears.

"Could one set of missing files be a misleading theft?" Fred suggested.

"But which one?" George responded.

The three whirled as the passage to their hidey-hole opened. As the Potions Master stepped through, Harry gathered his courage and asked, "Do you know what happened to my papers on the Dursleys?"

"This bolt-hole is painfully disorganized," Professor Snape drawled.  
"Are you sure they aren't amidst the piles?"

"They were organized just fine the last time we were able to be in here," the Second Year countered.

"List the missing pages, and we'll search for them more thoroughly at a later date. For now, it is close to curfew." The adult looked at all three adolescents in turn, "While Misters Weasley are fully trusted by the school to get around on their own, I don't trust the other three Houses in regards to yourself, Mister Potter."

"Yes sir," Harry grumbled mentally about suddenly being baby-sat all the time.

"Sir?" Fred took a chance. George's shock told the 'triplet' that much, "How did you know how to get in here?"

"Your map was quite informative," the man turned, "Though it has since been claimed by certain individuals for the sake of locating a person formerly presumed deceased."

"So you wouldn't know the password if we changed it, right?" Fred pressed on.

"Ask Mister Flint if you have any questions in that regard," the smirk on Snape's face told Harry even more than Flint's evasive action that he really didn't want to know. Judging by the twins' flinches, they didn't either.

Edging out the door, shaking his head, and mentally shuddering, Harry at first walked in front of his Head of House. Shortly though, after the twins ventured off in the direction of Gryffindor Tower, he supposed, the dark and usually quite grumpy man took the lead. A short pause later, and he chuckled quietly.

"Stop puzzling your brain into mush, Mister Potter," his very voice rang with the smirk on his face, "I have wards around the Slytherin Common Room, each of the dorms, and perimeter wards through out the dungeons. They tell me many things, among them being the

presence of warded belongings. For instance, last year, you cast several charms on your trunk, in order to protect the items within, did you not?"

Cautiously nodding, the boy thought that had been common knowledge. Though he hadn't actively told anyone, the fact still passed its way around the House within a day or two.

"The wards on the rooms are designed to detect such things. Thus when, during his third year here, Mister Flint tried to ward a book he owned to only open for his password, I knew about it." There was a brief pause as they reached the Common Room, "And though they managed to discover the trick during their tenure at Hogwarts, the Marauders aren't the only ones to learn how to charm paper to tell one what passwords are used on various objects."

"Oh," Harry blinked. "A book?"

"Yes, Potter, I can read," Flint joked.

Yipping, the Quidditch Seeker turned to look at the Sixth Year.

"I will leave you all to your own devices now," Professor Snape left.

"Someone had to ask about passwords huh?" the older boy chuckled. "It's not as bad as I'm making it sound. In Third Year, I fancied myself a regular comic, but knew that most people would only mock me for my jokes. So I wrote them down, and that was where. I eventually got paranoid about people reading them without me there to coach them through, so I thought I'd lock it up. Go figure, eh?"

Part of the darker-haired boy wanted to believe the burly teen. The rest remembered that people who didn't want their journals read in the Muggle world would often resort to passwords. The trick is, why did they need passwords? But after a bit, he realized he was mentally tracing a circle with those statements, and derailed his train of thought.

What little was left of the night was spent finishing homework revisions, making notes of the day and trying to read ahead. When

more of the page was spent yawning than retaining the words long enough to take notes, Harry decided it was time to turn in. It had been a rather long day.

So, now that we've made it through this three-part chapter (please forgive me for stretching it out so badly), I want to make a few things clear:

As I said up top, things as told in canon could go pear shaped.

The literary references aren't exactly on purpose, but apparently I miss having free time to read, so you guys get my allusions to play with.

I'm leaning towards the culprit behind the disappearing notes being Dobby, rather than Snape, Dumbledore, or Lockhart through various means. Just so you know.

I'm painfully behind at this point, and hopefully I'll catch up again soon. Until then, please have patience!

An observant reviewer informed me that I use 'brunet' too much. Thanks for the heads up. No, really. I mean it. If I hadn't had someone poke me about it, this chapter probably would have had more than the one or two times of it showing up that it did. If I start to switch over-used terms, please let me know. I'll scrounge up new phrases from somewhere, even if I have to look up archaic forms of address. (Okay, so that might be an exaggeration, but I hope the point still comes across.)

Oh, and I'm using the terms for the Snackbox as 'Puking Pastilles,' 'Nosebleed Nougats,' (canon) 'Pasty Peanutes,' and 'Migraine Mashes,' (mine). I will hopefully research the rest of the canon names, and add in a few of my own. If the Peanutes and mashes are canon or modified from it, let me know.

OUTTAKE: (or rather, author's mental outburst)

Author: (giggling at the potential comments about Flint's passworded item)

Flint: All right you, what's so funny?

Harry: She's laughing at the way people are going to take the thought of you being embarrassed to have Snape figure out your password.

Flint: It's not like that!

Harry: What else do you expect, with the jokes you tell!?

Flint: (grumbling)

Author: The truth of the matter is, that it's not X, R, or even, wait. That might be PG 13, I mean how many people actually want to see Flint in a frilly pink tutu?

Flint: IT WAS NOT A TUTU!

Author: (runs away, laughing)

Flint: (is going to pretend he was a Beater instead of a Chaser for a bit)

Sorry, I couldn't resist that one any more than I could the first one. Call it stress from classes and homework. Hope you enjoyed, and thanks for reading!

Even though they complained about the study of dragons, the Slytherins found themselves reluctant to enter the classroom on the first day that Bill Weasley would be teaching. In fact, the only good thing about it, in their minds, was that their next class was Potions again.

As the students arrived, the curse breaker stood, leaning against the desk in the front of the room. He waited for them to quiet, and began speaking.

"My name is Bill Weasley, for those of you who either didn't know, or couldn't figure out which one I am. I work for Gringotts normally, and just to warn you, I'm only going to be teaching through the end of February." The man's speech was hesitant, but clear, and Harry got the feeling that he'd never taught before. Tutored, maybe, but those were different instructional circumstances. "The Headmaster is working on finding someone to temporarily take up the position through the summer, and he's hoping they'll stay on even longer than that. Now for the good news. I don't care much for dragons, personally, so I'm not only going to not cover them any more, but whatever assignment my brother gave you to turn in to me, just drop it on my desk, and I'll count it as full credit."

As the students began muttering and -for Slytherins- cheering, Bill added, "Though it won't be much credit."

"Sir?" Goyle hesitated, "What are we going to cover then?"

"If I remember right, the first and second years of Defense are spent learning basic spells and their basic and varied applications," the curse breaker grinned. "Third Years are introduced to what are labeled as 'dark creatures.' Fourth Years are expected to apply all their spells to the creatures they've learned about."

"So Lockhart was teaching us out of order," Parkinson guessed.

"I'd heard he was teaching you all spells," Bill raised an eyebrow.

"He was using them on Potter, while explaining to us the 'best ways to defeat such foul beasts' as he had Potter pretend to be," Malfoy drawled.

"Ah," Bill stood away from the desk, "Well, Mister Potter, take comfort, for I'm not Lockhart. Of course, for bad news, I do still want you to come up front for me."

Puzzled, the brunet stepped away from his desk and moved to the front of the room, to stand with the eldest Weasley. The expressions on his Housemates' faces ranged from indignant to resigned as he stood there. A few seconds' wait as the curse breaker rummaged around on the desk, muttering about someone 'never picking up after' themselves.

"Ah, there it is," Bill drew a sheet of paper from a stack that had been sitting on the desk during Charlies' entire time teaching. "On this sheet of paper is a list of all your names. I confess, that though my youngest brother rants loud enough about you, I don't know you all by name and face. So my goal is to have each of you come up to the desk, one at a time, as I call your name, and we'll practice today's spell."

The silence of the room was almost deafening.

"Relax," Bill was chuckling, "I told you I'm not Lockhart. The spell we're working on today is commonly called the Mirror Hex. To cast it, you rotate your wrist in a clockwise fashion, starting at twelve o'clock, and ending back where you started. When you reach your starting point, you jab the wand at the ground, and call out 'Reflectus!'" The man mimed the actions as he spoke, resulting in a successful casting for an example. "You will then have a point roughly three feet in front of you that will mirror one hex, charm, curse, etcetera, as long as it's not cast by someone too much stronger than you. Which means that for most of you, you'll be protected from only your Yearmates and younger. If you're lucky."

Harry could see the wall of magic between himself and the redhead. A brief glance at Crabbe confirmed that he saw it too. The spell had been a strange yellow that was neither gold nor lemon. When the

class settled down a bit, Bill pointed at Harry and said, "Give it a shot, Mister Potter."

Blinking, Harry simply mimicked what he'd seen the adult do to cast the spell, and then shuddered at the sight of that strange yellow again. The chuckle from in front of told the boy his reaction had been noticed, and when he looked, the Second Year could see two of the fields between him and the curse breaker now.

A quick set of muttered words and the Weasley grinned at the boy in front of him, "I'll give you twenty points if you can either break my Mirror, or get the spell you cast to ricochet off mine to yours and back at me to hit me."

Eyes wide, Harry debated whether the man was trying to pull a prank.

"Sir, are you going to make this offer to all of us?" Bulstrode demanded.

"Sure," the shrug suggested that he didn't figure any of the children could accomplish the task. "Though only the first to succeed will get the twenty points. Those after will just get ten, but that's still a lot, I should think."

Braving a return of his hex, Harry tried the modified charm Lockhart had cast on him at the beginning of the year. He'd memorized the words, and the man always used the same gesture with his spells when he was about to mess them up, so that wasn't difficult either. The blast of icy blue shooting from his wand reflected off of the Mirror in front of him, then rebounded off of his own, and in the split second he had to notice, he saw the two shields disappear in what seemed like dust caught by sunlight in the summer.

The yelp from the curse breaker shocked Harry back out of his deepest thoughts, and the class erupted in snickers. They obviously recognized the spell that he'd used, and found it funny that Bill couldn't break out of it any more than the bespectacled child had. After he realized that the adult was as frozen as he'd been, Harry quickly cast the Ending Charm, and tried not to join his Housemates in their laughter as the redhead shuddered.

"What in the world was that?" the tone made the boy wonder if he was going to get detention, "I've never heard of that spell, please don't tell me a Second Year is creating spells!"

"No sir," Harry hesitated. He hated to give Lockhart credit for anything, but it might get the true creator found, "Lockhart used it on me at the beginning of the year. From research, I think it's a cross between the Freezing Charm and the Frozen Charm."

"Good grief," with another shudder, the substitute professor waved the child back to his seat, "A deal's a deal, so twenty points to Slytherin for your skilled use of reflection. Another five for aiding in the discovery of who really made that spell up."

The class gaped. Charlie had come off as though he hated Slytherins, what with his sour expression every time he gave points, and the minuscule amounts he gave them, in comparison to what they heard him having given other Houses. It had seemed so unjust that Harry had had to ask the twins what was going on. It turned out that the other Houses were stretching the truth, and that the dragon handler was just uncomfortable giving points at all.

The eldest Weasley, however, seemed at ease with the concept, and a sudden memory reminded Harry of a possible reason why. After all, the man had gotten practice with having been both Prefect and Head Boy during his time at Hogwarts.

To Harry, the rest of the class passed quickly, and it seemed as though the other Slytherin Second Years enjoyed themselves. Bill would recast his Mirror Hex and would coach the student in front of him on the spell until they had theirs in front of them. Then he'd ask them to either cast a spell at him to attempt the points as well, or to dispel it. When the Second Years were released, only another twenty points had been awarded, and those came from Parkinson's casting the Light Charm at his shield, which actually went through, being a passive spell, and from Malfoy pointing out the general weaknesses of the Hex.

Releasing the class, Bill chuckled, "Congratulations all of you, on learning the Mirror Hex. We'll cover it some more next class, and in the meantime, I'd like you all to research its origins and original uses, and turn in a ten inch essay next time. Mister Potter, if you'll stay back a bit?"

Watching the others filter out, Harry wondered what he'd done now. Malfoy, at the door, indicated to Crabbe and Goyle that they were to remain near the doors in case trouble started.

"You might have some true friends there," the redhead was rifling through the papers on the desk again, searching for something obviously, that he wasn't having much luck in finding.

"Why might?" Harry asked, suspicious.

"I'm not a former Slytherin, so I don't know at what point you all allow each other to use 'friend,' but if you allow it already, then they should be good for you." The curse breaker said, flourishing the end of the statement with an exclamation, as he had finally found what he was looking for. "Here it is, Lockhart's notes on how he taught his classes."

Wide-eyed, Harry wanted to lean forward. He didn't figure Lockhart would have written the truth for a class if he couldn't write it at any other point.

"All he's got is some strange notation about how you're purposely missing all of the questions on his quizzes, to deny your fascination with him. What an egotist. Why couldn't there be something we can use for his trial?" the eldest Weasley muttered.

"Professor Snape's returned to teaching, shouldn't that mean they aren't trying Lockhart anymore?" Harry had to know, choosing to ignore the other part of what the man had said.

"I don't know for sure, but it either means the Wizengamot representatives chosen for this case didn't trust Snape's testimony, or that he's finished giving it, and has been given leave to return to teaching." Bill answered.

"Probably the former, no one seems to trust a Slytherin any farther than they can throw us, and they don't even want to touch us," Harry muttered.

"There are things about your Head of House that you still haven't learned yet that are more likely the reason for people mistrusting him than that," Bill sighed, grabbed a small sheet of paper, and scribbled on it, "You'd be best off asking him personally. Though that might not guarantee you won't get yelled at."

"Yes sir," Harry looked around, then asked, "May I go now?"

"Er, not yet. I wanted to know if you'd made any progress in your custodial issues," at Harry's surprised look, he quickly added, "Some I'd heard about before the chamber, the rest I've since been filled in on, or deduced for myself."

Still somewhat befuddled, the boy rubbed his eye under his glasses. "Not exactly. The Headmaster seems set on not only believing the Dursleys over me, but also in sending me back. I think it's because of some blood-driven wards set around their house."

"Blood wards," the Gringott's employee groaned, "Those can be useful, under the right circumstances. If they're meant to protect objects from someone, nothing can get past them. But to protect a whole family?"

"That's right, you're a Ward Breaker," Harry remembered, "So how do they work?"

"You might not understand much of it, since this is beyond advanced Runes, Arithmancy, Charms and Defense, but from what I've heard about you, that'll only encourage you to find out about it." Shaking his head Bill began, "Wards are set around points. From there, those points are called Hearths. An Hearth, accordingly is one of the most important facets of a Ward Setter or Breaker's job. Sometimes they're nearly impossible to find, and that's usually the sign of a good Setter. For a blood ward however, their center is within what they're meant to protect. Thus they don't replenish themselves."

"And have to be renewed." The Second Year took notes, hoping his Yearmates weren't getting too impatient, and wouldn't get too mad about him sneaking in an extra Defense lesson.

"Right," grinning the redhead continued, "I'll try to make this concise, we both need to eat, and I'm sure you have an impromptu escort waiting. Anyway, as a blood ward can't regenerate, it has to be manually renewed. This is usually done through the shedding of blood. Mark that, almost universally, blood is used to renew this type of ward. There are categories within the umbrella of 'Blood Ward,' but most people don't know about them."

Blinking, Harry wondered if the wards at Privet Drive would be something familiar to the man.

"Beyond even the blood sacrifice part, the fact about these wards that makes them so, touch and go is that, also due to their anchor being the protected item or individual, their size varies." Bill shrugged, "If they're say, forcibly tied to other wards in an effort to extend their territory, they become, unstable. If one were set up to keep a certain individual from harm, by tying the ward to others, it negates a portion of the protection. Thereby creating the loophole that only those outside of the barriers are kept from doing harm. Step foot outside, or should they come in, and the wards don't notice. Unless another ward is also tied in that looks for specific traits. But at this point, you're tying even more variable in, which makes them all more unpredictable, what with the blood ward warping things. Does that help?"

"More than a little, though it does create a great many more questions." The boy folded together his notes.

"If you continue to be interested in the topic, or still have trouble, I can go over basic wards in class, as a historic aspect. Goodness knows Binns isn't going over them."

Having been on his way out the door, the brunet paused, "Just why exactly is he still teaching? No one's really learning anything in his class, except maybe quieter yawning techniques."

"He was dead when I was here, so I have no better idea than you, other than that petitioning for his release is turned down at the Board of Governors reliably." The temporary teacher sighed, "If you're having trouble in that class, I think Percy can help. He's quite likely to get Head Boy next year with the way he's going."

Nodding in thanks to the Weasley as he left, Harry met his Housemates at the door of the classroom. The youngster shook his head, telling them it wasn't him in trouble, nor anything all that important. Though it drove him more than a little bonkers, his whole House was still maintaining the bodyguard mindset.

True, the other Houses were still grumbling about the 'unjust' points awarded to Harry by the Headmaster, but they were just muttering. Frankly, he felt like a smothered chick in the nest, and hoped that the recent return of the Potions Master would be enough to alleviate the pressure.

In the Common Room, the Second Years dispersed somewhat, as most of the boys were headed in the same direction, but the girls simply seemed to disappear. Exchanging the Defense papers for a Potions text, the boys packed up and ventured back up.

During lunch, Harry was more than a little annoyed at the older students. They were still pestering him about making a study group, and by this point he'd heard enough about it. He'd gotten the list of people who needed help, and what times they might have available. He'd given copies to Percy and Wood, and hadn't heard back yet. For now at least, the stall wasn't his fault, and if he was asked one more time about it, he was liable to say something unfortunate.

Luckily for him, his ruminating had him concentrating on his surroundings. So, for once when a person approached the Slytherin Table, Harry wasn't surprised. As the steps stopped behind him, he turned, and was a little surprised to see the youngest Weasley behind him.

"Was there something you needed?" he asked.

"I, um, I'm sorry it's taken me so long, but um," the girl stuttered, "I wanted to thank you for saving my life. I, uh, I never stopped to think that the book might be more than pages of Zonko's paper sewn together. I'm still getting letters from mum and dad about it."

"Okay, you've thanked him. Now what?" Bole grumbled.

"I wanted to know if there was any way, uh," the girl blushed redder than her hair, stuttered inaudibly and then dashed off.

"I think she had a crush," Derrick turned his head sideways first one way, then the other, then looked at the Second Year across from him, "And your saving her made it even worse."

"Oh, this is going to be fun," Montague snickered.

"What are you planning?" the green-eyed boy demanded.

"It's not so much what we're planning that you have to worry about, Potter," Derrick smirked, "as it is you should worry about her. She's got a crush on you, and Valentine's Day is around the corner."

The younger boy paled.

"Thought you'd see it that way," Bletchley laughed.

Though he wanted to pout about the subject and try to convince the others that it wasn't possible, Harry had to accept that they were right, her behavior just a bit earlier was much like the way she'd acted during the summer. At the same time, he couldn't dwell on it, as it was time to head off to Potions.

Having noticed the dire and rather frightening glares of their Head of House, the Slytherins quickly took their seats and settled in. Sulky Gryffindors followed a few minutes later, just before class was to start. At the moment the class was to begin, Professor Snape stalked out of his storeroom, scowling.

"I certainly don't expect any of you to have studied, therefore I will test you all on just how much information your vapid, pathetic

excuses for brains have allowed to sift out." The Potions Master snarled.

After the quiz, which left a sinking feeling in Harry's guts, the Professor assigned the students to put together the first step of a fairly complicated potion. This left the boy wondering if some of the students were being set up to fail. What puzzled him was why. Then he remembered the conversation with Bill, and had to ask himself if it could be because of the trial, or if someone in the school had infuriated him.

He was looking up, apparently at just the exact moment that the dark eyes were focused on him, and accidentally the gazes met. He was most assuredly not prepared for the expression on his Head of House's face. It looked like hatred personified, and left the child shivering internally. It never occurred to him to think it might have been directed at someone else, after all, back in Surrey, everything was his fault, even if there was no way he could have done it. So he quickly returned to peering at his potion, working frantically on it, to keep it from sliding out of that precious shade of pearly blue, to pure white.

A verbal explosion and a half later, the class ended. Again, Harry found himself being held back for a discussion, and again, the other Slytherins waited for him just outside. Or they would have, but Professor Snape waved them on, saying he'd escort the Second Year to the Common Room himself.

"Mister Potter," the drawl did nothing to set Harry's nerves back to a calm state. "I was informed that Mister Weasley held you back after class this morning."

"Yes sir," hesitantly, the child responded, "He shuffled papers around on the desk and grumbled about Lockhart not having any paperwork to support the charges against him. Then he discussed blood wards with me for a bit."

"Nothing more?" the snarl was there, but somewhat buried.

"Well, while we were talking about the trial, I said something kind of bitter about no one believing Slytherins, and he answered with something like the reason why you're not trusted, and was vague about it." Harry scratched his scalp just behind his left ear.

"The Wizengamot members supervising this trial wanted to require that I submit to Veritaserum to testify to the man's idiocy." Snape seemed to stare off into a corner of the room darkly, "When they were denied that, they all but threw my words out. There is a reason for that, but at this time, I see no point in telling you about the follies of my youth."

"Did they require anyone else to take a truth serum?" the angle of his head caused the child's lenses to glint in the light.

"As it was a preliminary hearing, to discover if there were enough grounds to proceed, no," the Potions Master shook his head, "Though the Headmaster, during his two hours of testimony, volunteered, provided they swear to ask only questions about the trial."

"Oh," briefly, Harry wondered why they were testing to see if there would be a trial. Then he remembered how popular Lockhart had been, and figured the fop was demanding it, getting it because of his fan base.

"Just how did you and Mister Weasley get onto the topic of blood wards?" Snape drawled.

"He asked me if I had made progress regarding who has custody of me," shaking his head, the youth shrugged, "So I mentioned them in passing, and was reminded of his job under most circumstances. It was actually interesting."

"Hm." Pointing the boy out the door, the Slytherin adult issued a warning, "There are rather unfortunate dangers to pursuing the Headmaster's neglect of yourself. Should he be prosecuted, the Ministry is fully prepared to question his assignment of all professors, staff, and Heads of House. Professor Binns, as a ghost with more tenure than any other teaching here, and Professor McGonagall

would be the only instructors not investigated, though her status as Deputy Headmistress would be suspended at the least."

"They'd fire you and Professor Trelawney outright, wouldn't they?" the preteen asked.

"I have more than a single complaint on my record from parents, so yes. And the Divinations Professor is generally regarded as a charlatan, so her job would also be revoked." The two were just outside of the Common Room as the man muttered, "While generally mocked for his intelligence, the Minister is a politically-minded individual, and will not hesitate to do what is best for his career, thus what the mob mindset would demand."

Turning, the professor left the Second Year just inside the Common Room, puzzling out the bits of information he'd just received. His expression must have shown his discomfort, because Malfoy spoke up. "Potter, why are you looking at the chair in front of you like you're eating a lemon drop?"

"I was talking to Professor Snape about the conversation with, er, with Bill," the darker-haired boy still didn't know what to call the Ward Breaker acting as a teacher. "He brought up the possibility that if the Headmaster's judgement is questioned, it will wind up bringing an inquiry as to all of his decisions. Like teacher appointments."

"The Headmaster doesn't have that kind of power. All someone needs to do is speak up about how the decisions were approved by the Ministry, and to provide the paperwork to back it up." Malfoy responded.

"You're sure?" Harry demanded.

"Yes, Potter, we're sure," Parkinson contributed to the conversation.

"That must mean someone told someone who made sure it eventually got back to you, so you'd stop digging in things that scare them," Zabini's insight had the whole room looking at him, "What? I may not be a Granger or Potter, but I'm capable of deductive

reasoning. Oh, and just because suspect number one is the Headmaster himself, it doesn't mean that it is him."

"We knew that," Bulstrode grumbled, "But how do we get rid of the Headmaster without losing our Head of House? Mum told me about the man who had the job before Professor Snape. He catered to power, whether it was magical, political, or physical. With most of our family names having been dragged through the mud, we'd never stand a chance with him or someone like him. And most of the rest of the population to boot."

"So we wait, like I had wanted to in the beginning," Harry shrugged much the same as he had during his conversation with the Potions Master.

"Potter, if we wait too long nothing will happen at all! They'll be able to dream up something to discredit your testimony, and you'll never get away from the Muggles!" Crabbe yelled.

"Maybe I need to spend this next summer with them," Harry suddenly had an idea. Pleasant, it was not, but it might have the results he needed, without all of the verbal and political dancing going on currently.

"Why would you think that?" Greengrass's eyes showed her shock.

"They'll feel I was sent to them because no one believes me, so they'll treat me same old- same old, or worse, figuring they're off the hook," the brunet explained, "That way we can get documentation of their treatment of me. Though that will mean someone will have to photograph me just before the end of the year as a reference."

"You're off your rocker," Goyle was shuddering and shaking his head.

The idea was discussed, torn apart, recombined, given new information regarding the situation well into the after noon. A sharp buzzing sound reminded the students to not get too far ahead of themselves, they had to rest before class that night.

The class itself, and even the studies of the constellations flew by to Harry's perception. When the moon rose, he saw its fullness, and was unable to keep from joining his Housemates in their shiver regarding the mournful howl that sounded across the grounds of the school.

I don't want to give names, since some readers don't seem to like the idea, but thanks go to one reviewer for the tidbit about Dumbledore not being the decision maker for Professor appointments. I say that canon could go to the wayside, but this is one point I'm going to use, canon or not. See, schools where I come from do their hiring through the board of education. So having the Headmaster/Principal unable to have final say is a normal concept to me. I didn't think of it until said reviewer pointed it out in a comment a few chapters ago.

The way I'm running with it is that the Headmaster, when faced with a position to fill, goes through the applications, reads them, and picks one he likes the best. From there, he sends his selection to the Board, and moves on. If they accept, the position is filled. If not, the process begins anew. The board has to indicate their reason for refusing the applicant. If the Headmaster can't find an instructor by, say the first of July, the Ministry will start their own searching process. I'll flesh it out more later, if I need to, but I have issues with Umbridge, so much so that I'd love to keep her out of Hogwarts to begin with. Meh.

After a week or two of learning Defense at the hands of the eldest Weasley, Harry wasn't sure if he regretted that Charlie couldn't come back to teach. The dragon handler had stuck with one topic, and while it was rather exhausted by the time he left, at least Harry walked out knowing a lot more about dragons. Bill, however, was a curse-breaker. That meant his focus was on Defense spells. It didn't take long to learn that Bill favored the spells over the creatures. He was very firmly in the camp of, 'why learn about vampires, trolls and pixies in Defense? Those are subjects for Care of Magical Creatures.'

Thanks to his first year, Harry more than half expected to be the test dummy again. Even after the first class. This idea wasn't helped by the fact that he actually remembered the man who'd taught last year. Of course, when the redhead told the boy to cast the indicated spell at him nearly every class, Harry boggled.

A little prompting, some liberal taunting, and a few badly aimed attempts later, and Harry felt much better about the Defense class than he had, well, ever. It was when Bill broke down the components of the spells and explained why they did what they did that the Second Years got worried.

Though they enjoyed the detailed explanations, none of them had had Runes or Arithmancy, and most of what the Gringott's worker said went over their heads. Fortunately, it didn't take him long to catch on to that. Bill laughed at himself and then broke his lecture up into terms the students could understand better.

The rest of Harry's classes moved along as per normal, except for Potions. After the Head of Slytherin had returned from testifying against Lockhart, he was surlier than ever. Even the Slytherins had to watch their step in class. Sure, he wouldn't take points from them, but he still snapped.

Point in fact was the instance of Malfoy throwing a Sylph wing into Ron and Finnegan's potion. The resulting smell chased out the entire class, and Snape had snarled at the pale-blond boy for at least twenty minutes in the Common Room. After that, it wasn't nearly as difficult for Harry to cobble together interested Slytherins for his study group. They even kept their grumbling to a minimum when he

informed them of the study group taking place in the library, and that the rest of the population included the other Houses.

During one of these study sessions, Harry overheard Granger muttering about House Elves, and blinked. Ron, Finnegan and Thomas were all elsewhere, and the girl was trying to find laws and rules governing the Pureblood family servants. Hoping against hope she was just researching them, and not actually recounting an adventure with one, for example Dobby, he slipped around the bookcase in question to try listening.

"I don't understand how they can be so casual," she muttered to herself, "I mean, the wizards making the deal with them were obviously hiding details. Surely they didn't tell the Elves that they'd find themselves unable to speak ill of their masters, even if it were the truth? And I certainly don't believe they made it clear that they would be required to punish themselves!"

Fed up, the boy stalked over and spoke up, "I hope you're researching their history, and not just the contracts!"

Jumping, the girl whirled to face him, and stuttered, "I-it doesn't matter! The wizards didn't!"

"It's not in the books because the information is assumed." Harry stalked over to a nearby shelf, where there was a book on House Elves. He pulled it, and turned to the index to double-check the pages he wanted. Then he flipped to it, and turned the book to face Granger and growled, "Here, read this."

A minute or two later and she looked up, "So what are you trying to say? That the House Elves can't take care of themselves?"

"The best anyone can figure, they are somewhere between elves and dwarves or goblins. The former were peaceful, calm, generally seen as docile. The latter two have their own contracts with wizarding kind, to keep them from being overly violent, bloodthirsty and destructive." Jabbing a finger into the page, Harry tried to make it as clear as possible, "The preexisting contracts with dwarves and goblins affected the House Elves'. Team that with the general nature of elves

and you've got creatures that focus almost exclusively on one thing, as per goblins, work hard, as the dwarves, and are docile. These traits combined so that a freed House Elf cannot say 'no'. Hence the contract with them, making them belong to families."

"But why add in the inability to speak ill of their master?" her next question left the boy frightened. If she couldn't figure this out, and she was 'the smartest witch of her generation,' then the rest of the world was doomed.

"Surely you've heard of patient confidentiality," the boy sighed, "It's like that. The clause about speaking benevolently was added when a person who had been forced to find a new family for their Elves found out they were being prosecuted for their crimes. It was later indicated that the Elf is the one who spilled the beans."

"But to be so casual about it!" the dentists' daughter exclaimed.

"I'm not the person to yell at," the Slytherin groused, "I lived ten years as a House Elf without magic."

"Then you more than anyone should be upset!" she was still determined to make her point.

"Granger," he sighed, "The alternative is that the House Elves are worked to death on things. They do have protections you know. The magics of the contract prevent their owner from issuing a punishment that would result in death. They are required to take breaks every four hours of constant work, and the families have to teach them how to do tasks, even if the tutoring is done at the hands of another elf. It's a lot like a full time job for humans."

"But they're no better than possessions," by this point, Harry wanted to throw his hands in the air and give up. She wasn't changing any point of her thoughts on this.

"Frankly its like that for us kids. We're effectively possessions to our parents and guardians, they don't have to pay us for our chores, can dictate what punishments to set for behavior, arbitrarily deciding

which actions deserve said retributions," he was interrupted by another female voice.

"There is a clause in the contracts, I think," Parkinson had spotted the argument and wanted to prevent the older students from making it worse, "If you activate it, you can temporarily get a completely honest opinion from the House Elf. I'd use that, and ask a few if they like what they do."

"They don't know any better!" Granger yelled.

"So you do?" the Slytherin girl cocked her head sideways, "Why don't you put off your efforts to free the House Elves until you're in Care of Magical Creatures, and ask the Professor about House Elves."

"They'll just want to keep the status quo," the Gryffindor Second Year grumbled.

"Then find another crusade to venture on," Harry snapped, "I've had to change mine twice. What your problem is you're trying to save the species you think is in trouble, but aren't stopping to think about the trauma you might cause them."

Granger left with a huff, and the preteen sighed. Then he tensed back up. Parkinson's calculating look set him on edge.

"Potter, we never saw you research this, how do you know it?" she asked.

"I've been working with Bletchley on rights for Magical Creatures. We briefly toyed with the idea of freeing House Elves, but found that," he pointed at the book he'd shown Granger. "and changed our minds. There are no documented cases of an Elf being set free. They're always killed, or transferred to another family. Speaking of which, why are there families, like the Weasleys that don't have Elves?"

"The contract is an expensive venture," the blonde sighed. "That family has come upon bad times financially. Most of us in Slytherin are still trying to figure out how they can come here."

"You could ask the proverbial horse, you know," Fred's voice caused both Slytherins to jump and whirl.

"Though in all likelihood we'd tell you it's none of your business," George drawled. The twins glanced at each other, then with a smirk, they snagged an arm under one of Harry's and hoisted him into the air, and marched right out of the library with him.

"Ah, guys?" Harry was caught somewhere between laughing and wincing. They had bony hands, and their fingers dug into his arm. But he was more than a little ticklish.

"Don't worry Harrikins," Fred chuckled.

"We just wanted to warn you," George smirked.

"Tomorrow's the fourteenth," Fred relayed.

"Oh no," Harry sunk into himself, "What kind of prank are you two dreaming up now?"

"No no, not us," Fred laughed.

"The Headmaster wanted to celebrate, especially since it's only a couple more weeks until the Mandrakes can be used to cure the petrification," George snickered.

"What's he got planned?" the 'triplet' whimpered.

"There's going to be magicked midgets running around all day tomorrow." George rubbed his hands together with glee. They had reached their headquarters, and were inside.

"They'll be charmed to take requests from students. You know, girl says 'I want the boy of my dreams to know how I feel!'" the falsetto made the other two boys wince.

"I think the old man's goal is to see which students have the largest collection of midgets following them around." George rubbed his ear, further mocking his twin.

"Why would he want to know that?" the Second Year yelped.

"Dunno, might just be for laughs." Fred shrugged.

"Wonder what kind they'll be? Maybe Sylphs?" and from there, the twins carried out their version of a tennis match for a few minutes. Harry ignored it, trying to figure out a way to keep from getting any anti-love notes. Wondering whether he could get away with being around Malfoy all day, and thus deterring the winged wonders, he realized that the twins were bantering the names of small winged Fae species. Minus a couple of varieties.

"Why wouldn't he use Salamands or Undines?" the youngest of the three asked.

"The Salamands are too violent, and Undines, even fake ones, don't do well outside of water." Fred responded.

"Besides," George nodded, "The Mermaids in the lake would throw fits. Mermaids and Undines don't get along."

"Guess they're like us and Perce in that regard." Fred sighed.

"Mermaids are all seriousness and utilitarian, while Undines only want to play." George mirrored his twin.

"Percy isn't that bad," Harry rolled his eyes, "He just seems like it because all you want to do is have fun."

"And what's wrong with having fun?" George challenged.

"Nothing. But you have to remember to be something else every so often, or you won't remember to value the opportunity to be silly as much," Harry rubbed his forehead.

The door to their hidey-hole opened and two strange men stepped through. One was tallish and had greying brown hair falling around his ears. He looked so tired, that Harry wondered if he hadn't been looking for Madame Pomfrey, to take an impromptu nap. The other

was even taller, with reddish hair, and was holding a bit of parchment, looking rather intently at it.

"Ironically, this room is labeled Marauders Headquarters," the mild voice of the first seemed like he wanted to laugh, but there wasn't the energy for it.

"Er," the twins spoke in unison.

Harry spotted the paper in the taller man's hands, "Are you the one they gave the map to?"

"Oh?" both men looked up, and the red-haired man finally focused on the three students in the room. He stared at the twins briefly then returned his attention to the map.

The other sniffled, rubbed his nose, and turned his attention to Harry. Then he blinked, leaned forward a bit, and cocked his head sideways. Jolting a bit, he seemed to remember something, then responded, "Yes, I was the one they gave the Marauders Map to. I'm on the crew to locate proof of Peter Pettigrew's being alive."

"Why is it such a big deal?" Harry asked.

Noticing that the twins were gaping as much as the exhausted man, the youth blinked and said, "What did I say?"

"You don't know?" the quieter man's eyes were dark, almost as dark as the Potions Master's. "Didn't your guardians tell you?"

"No one really seems to want to tell me anything," the boy crossed his arms in front of himself.

"Oh my," rubbing his nose, the shorter man waved a hand at the three youths, "Please. Follow me. We need to make a side trip to the Infirmary, for a headache draught, anyway."

The five made their way to the medical wing of the school, where the more talkative adult knocked, and slipped inside after a bit. He held the door open for the triplets and coworker, then took a seat on one

of the beds. Waving a hand at them again, "You might as well sit. This has the potential to be a very long story."

"Mister Lupin, what are you doing here, and why do you have, oh dear, the Weasley triplets." Pomfrey's voice, though laced with concern, was also dosed with a liberal amount of humor.

"Triplets?" the other man blinked, "They don't look anything alike."

"Harry's our adopted brother." Fred piped up.

"And better us than Ron." George grinned.

"Tell me why we want to trust you," Harry suddenly acted upon the unease he'd been feeling the entire walk to the Infirmary.

"I wondered when one of you would ask that," the weary man chuckled and then asked Pomfrey for the Headache Draught.

"Peter Pettigrew, roughly eleven years ago was given an Order of Merlin, first class, post-mortem." The mapholder spoke up. "Hearing that he might be alive raises suspicions about several things. One being whether the Order of Merlin should be revoked, as he had to have faked his death. For him to do that, he had to have a reason, and so some suspect that there is a man in Azkaban that shouldn't be."

"Why does it matter if my guardians didn't tell me?" the green-eyed boy demanded.

"Because the man that might be alive was to have died at the hands of the one in Azkaban," the sandy-haired adult sighed, and Harry noticed that he looked old. Like he'd aged twenty years in two minutes. "And the one in Azkaban, possibly wrongly, was to have been your Godfather."

"Why do you know this?" the Second Year narrowed his eyes at the man who'd just taken the Headache Drought.

"During their generation, it was actually common knowledge," the younger man was still staring at his piece of paper. A pause, and he looked at the other man, "Did you know that there are supposed to have been wards against this thing?"

Looking over, the older man smiled wanly, "Yes, I knew. I also know how we got around them. If there was anything I was good at that I'm truly proud of, it's Arithmancy."

"All in the numbers then," the one that could almost pass for a Weasley muttered.

"So, you're Mister Lupin," Fred was fishing, and wasn't ashamed to make it obvious, so he pointed right at the taller of the men. "And you are?"

"When I'm working, like now, I go by the name Tyler," shaking his head, he tapped the paper in front of him and his next words had all three boys jumping off the mattresses.

"That's the Marauders' Map!" George yelled.

"I thought you'd already figured that out," Tyler's wrinkled eyebrow spoke volumes to the Slytherin. Then his brain added a few facts together. Lupin had had a hand in the building of the map. That had to mean he was a Marauder. If Pettigrew had been the rat, that left Moony, Prongs or Padfoot as the nickname for the exhausted old man. Research on werewolves spoke of those afflicted seeming to age seven years for every year they lived with the curse and it really became apparent after they reached their maturity.

So, looking too old to be a contemporary of Harry's father left the child to suspect that Lupin was a werewolf. A sudden thought broadsided the child's mental processes, and he started giggling.

"Er, Harry?" George looked back at his adopted brother, concern all over his face.

"What's wrong?" Fred's face was, even more so than usual, a mirror of his twin's.

"Lupin, sir, you're a werewolf, right?" the boy spoke around his giggles.

Both adults tensing gave him all the answer he needed. The redhead blinked, "Well, that's a record."

"What makes you say that?" Lupin hesitated.

"Well, I can only suppose that if you worked on the map, you not only attended Hogwarts with my father, but also were a Marauder. You look a lot older though, which I've read is a symptom of those with lycanthropy for extended periods of time," Harry listed, "Plus, you're beyond tired, which fits, as the full moon was last week. Anyway. If Pettigrew is still alive, then he's a rat, thus Wormtail isn't going to have been your nickname. That leaves Prongs, Padfoot and Moony."

"You're in Ravenclaw, aren't you?" the almost pride in Lupin's voice stung.

"No, I'm in Slytherin." All humor drained from Harry's gaze.

Smirking, Tyler thwacked Lupin lightly across his front, "Told you."

"Do you have a problem?" Fred and George chimed in simultaneously.

The boys were obviously destined to wait for Lupin's response, as Professor Snape chose that moment to stride into the room. Of course, Professor McGonagall was right behind him, but the movement of the thought flowed better if she was left out, or so Harry thought.

"You were to keep away from the students," the Potions Master hissed, glaring at both men.

"Well, if they're in places they aren't supposed to be," Lupin seemed somewhat reluctant to argue with the irate man.

"Then you should simply turn them in and wait until they've left before entering the room," Snape continued to snarl.

"And take the chance that the rat will get away again?" the werewolf asked.

"I'm not saying you two can't have this discussion," Tyler held the map up into the space between the two, blocking each from the other's sight. "But I was under the impression that it was around the time for the younglings to return to their Common Rooms. And while I can find them with the map, I would figure Professor Snape would be more comfortable guiding the boys to them himself. While we're at it, Lupin and I can get back to our task here."

Harry was rather fascinated by the animosity both men were displaying. He'd figured that the Potions Master wasn't fond of the original Marauders, but to see just how pale that statement seemed in comparison to the reality was an eye opening experience. Not to mention, it seemed mutual.

"Lupin," the stressing of his name made the lighter-colored man flinch.

"Surely by now you'd have better control," Madame Pomfrey hissed at both men.

The Potions Master, fuming, led the three boys out of the Infirmary. Rather, he frog-marched them, Harry thought. It was especially rough on someone as much shorter than the others as he was. Midway through their trek, the quartet was met by Professor McGonagall. She nodded sharply at her coworker and led the twins off.

"Mister Potter, if you would refrain from making this a habit. I will soon have to begin taking points off," Snape was trying not to snarl, and the boy appreciated the gesture.

"Sorry sir, but we're working on projects and losing track of time, even with a time charm placed," Harry hoped that the man wouldn't read it as a sad excuse.

"I am only concerned that the members of other Houses will complain more loudly than usual of my 'bias,' for my own House." The man drawled.

"But sir, you are biased," the child hurried to continue, seeing the blooming fury, "All of the professors are. They're biased against us, so you're biased for. Neither option really helps any of us, but at least we know someone is on our side."

"It will take more than seven years for children raised by and with generations of disgust for our House, members, and beliefs to cease hating us," Harry decided to take that as a warning, and hoped it would keep him from being too disappointed in the rest of the school. But he wasn't going to hold his breath, as he rather liked not turning blue.

Reaching the Common Room, another thought occurred to him, and so he asked of his Head of House, "That second man, the one with the map, why is he here?"

"He is part of the team investigating the possible presence of Pettigrew." Snape grumbled, "One of Gringott's Ward Setters, and a possible candidate for interim Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor."

"Why wouldn't he get it?" the Second Year blinked.

"He's got to ask Gringott's for the vacation time that will extend past the two month break he'll get for taking two jobs in a row." Flint smirked at the Seeker, as usual, standing just outside of the Common Room, waiting for their return.

"How do you all know this?" Harry was incredulous.

"Well, Potter, if you'd come to the Common Room instead of wandering off with the Weasley twins, you'd have been here when Tyler and Lupin dropped by to warn us we were supposed to stay in our Common Rooms. Apparently they were searching the school for magical signatures that didn't belong. They tried to eliminate

variables by having the students quarantined, but it didn't work," Landale smirked.

"Oh." The short-ish boy was left fairly speechless.

After the Potions Master left, the children began sharing the information they had, completing homework, practicing, and in some cases, working on completely extra-curricular work. Bletchley and Harry had been able to find a few more details concerning certain species that led the elder to believe they might be able to overturn some of the laws currently on the books for those species.

When he was yawning more than reading, the Slytherin Keeper tapped Harry on the shoulder and suggested, "I'm about to fall over. I think we should call it a night."

Nodding, the younger boy agreed. They packed up their books, notes and writings, and went their separate ways for the day.

As he went to sleep, Harry was left with the recurrence of the thought he'd giggled at in front of Lupin and Tyler. The older man had more or less been cursed before the attack that gave him lycanthropy. After all, one only had to add an 'e' to 'Lupin,' to get 'lupine.'

My take on House Elf behavior. The reason why they didn't keep the Elves' ability to speak ill/truth was because the 'nobler' houses carry out all kinds of petty tricks on one another for the sake of power. They wanted to have the judicial system reserved for the bigger crimes, like Harry using a Patronus to defend himself against a Dementor sicced on him by Umbridge. :( Yes that was sarcastic. I hope to not have that happen in my story, but who knows? Besides the powerful houses were the ones pressing for it, pushing it into legislature, and getting it approved. So of course it'd happen.

Seeing as I'm still arguing with myself over whether Lupin's teaching Year Three or not, we'll have Tyler as a stand in, for at least to the end of the year. He might get to stick around a little longer, if the folks at Gringotts are talked around to viewing it as a job. Maybe he'll get to reset the wards at Hogwarts. Of course, the kids will learn a completely different line of thought with him teaching. Bill specializes

in taking them down, while Tyler has mastered the art of creating wards. Okay, so they're really re-creations, but still, he's building them.

Harry catching on so quick is partly due to his having done a lot of research with Bletchley, and partly due to Lupin's not trying so hard to hide it while in a non-teaching medium. Aside from the twins, I rather doubt anyone would catch on as quickly. Likely as not, he's not expecting to be asked to take on the job.

Oh, and right now, I'm struggling with how to get around the 'Marauders' issue as far as Harry is concerned. Thus, it could be a bit before he willingly goes to live with Mister Black.

The next day, Harry woke with a vague sense of dread hanging over his head. For the time it took to clean up, dress, and go to the Great Hall, he was too sleepy to remember why he was worried about the day, but that didn't last long. About as long as it took for the first winged menace to flutter up to his head and sing in a rather high-pitched trill.

He couldn't really make sense of the words, as the voice was too high in its register for him to try that early in the day to make sense of it. It certainly didn't help that what he could catch on about it was rather horrific poetry. So the green-eyed youth tried to focus on the scrambled eggs on his plate, even as the tiny being settled on his shoulder.

"So, Potter, got your first Valentine, did you?" Flint snickered at the Second Year. When he looked up, said Seeker could see a passenger on the older student's shoulder.

"Why can't we just skip this day?" Harry didn't really remember what had happened the year before, because it had been blissfully quiet.

The mail arrived, and something randomly occurred to the small preteen. If he was supposed to be popular, why had his volume of mail been the same as normal last year? Not that he wanted more, mind you, but it was a puzzle.

"Wonder where the two Pettigrew hunters went?" Goyle mumbled to himself.

"Hogwarts doesn't exactly get many guests during the year," Zabini sighed, "Though I doubt it'd be much of a challenge to expand the tables by two settings, chances are they were asked to avoid students as much as possible."

"What I want to know is how long we've got to deal with passengers?" Malfoy grumbled from three seats down. He had no less than three creatures sitting on his shoulders, and it seemed like each was a different variety. Blinking, the sleepy Seeker tried to puzzle out the details.

After a few mouthfuls of food, the critter on his shoulder demanded its share, and Harry mouted off, "I didn't ask you to hop on my shoulder, little guy, so why do I have to feed you? Why not demand food from the person who sent you to me?"

The little brown being sniffed at him and started tugging on his hair. Malfoy, snickered, until his riders began calling for their own food. In short order the blond found himself feeding them more than his own stomach. Sighing, Harry offered a bit of fruit, hoping that the brown faerie was modeled after a dryad, which wouldn't eat meat or grain. As long as it was a fruit that didn't come from a tree, the tiny one would eat it.

A little chitter greeted his efforts, and he settled back into his own breakfast. Right about the time he was going to start back to pondering what the types of shoulder-hoppers meant to the messages, a tiny voice began singing at him. He was awake enough now to hear the words.

"Eyes of green, hair a mess, with all you've seen, I must confess; though life's been unkind, you've done just fine, if you wouldn't mind, would you be mine?" The high-pitch was only a little less painful than that of the dryad-type on already on his shoulder, so the boy winced.

"At least it's passable poetry, Potter," Zabini smirked, "this time. The first one was horrible, I could have sworn the person who sent it asked the thing to make up its own rhyme."

"As near as I can figure," Montague finished his omelet and began explaining, "the types of faeries is indicative of the message. The browns are for simple ones, as dryads are reticent in nature. Greens, the nymphs, are the next step up. Turquoise sylphs, and then violet naiads. So, Potter, your second message was a Sylph. Guess someone really likes you, eh?"

Peering at the sylph construct through his glasses, he wondered what the individuals sending them paid for the message relay. He didn't suppose he was going to find out though, as it was time to head off to class. Luckily the simpler classes were that day, and they wouldn't

have to worry about the winged fiends ticking the Potions Master off even more than he had been of late.

"I don't envy anyone with a messenger on their shoulder in Professor Snape's class today," Bletchley smirked at Flint, who shook a fist at the Fifth Year as he stalked off.

During Herbology, even though he was supposed to be paying attention, Harry was distracted by an idea that occurred to him now that he was fully awake. Luckily, the class was working with Briar Roses instead of the Mandrakes.

Briar Roses, like the roses Harry had spent a painful amount of time tending back in Surrey, had thorns. Unlike the ones he was used to, the roses would actively wrap around a person fool enough to reach for them, to pierce the skin with their thorns. They would then secrete a fluid that caused their victim to fall asleep, all the while tightening their grip. Because they weren't carnivorous themselves, the general location for a patch of Briar Roses to be found was in a forest with carnivorous animals around.

The Seeker was paying enough attention that he wasn't put to sleep, but he wasn't able to focus on the task that Professor Sprout had set them. Briar Rose milk, the fluid to sleep the creatures in their clutches, was most easily harvested as groups of people fended the vines off, and sliced into the thorns themselves. So the group of four he was a part of had one easily named distraction for the vines to swarm at.

He had just worked out the details to the prank that had come to mind when Nott tugged on the back of his shirt, saying, "Potter, we've got all the Briar milk we need, you can step back now."

Blinking, the boy grinned sheepishly, and stepped away from the plants.

"Are you going to tell us why you're staring off into space?" Malfoy drawled.

"I was thinking about something that might liven up the day," Harry vaguely pointed at the dryad and sylph on his shoulder, "Since I don't

have the supplies or time to write it down, I was thinking all the details through on my own."

"And?" Zabini rounded out the group who'd just finished the class project.

"Sorry, if I told you, it'd ruin the surprise," the Muggle-raised child was half-certain there was a quote he could have used in that instance, but didn't know it well enough.

Shortly after, the class was released to lunch, and rather than walk directly to the Common Room or to the Great Hall, Harry made for the Headquarters. He would later figure that something in his movement registered on some radar of the twins' because he met them at the door.

"Had an idea for livening up the day," Fred grinned.

"We're going to ask the House Elves if we can make the ceiling in the Hall rain, and have Singing Sticks nearby to activate." George chuckled.

Wide-eyed, Harry tried not to laugh. His idea had been to mix a few of the candies they'd made last year into the food. The resulting zoo would be a, well, it would be funny. They still hadn't made any candies that turned people into owls, or it really would be a hoot. He suggested adding in the candies, and all three started laughing.

They then jumped about ten feet into the air when they realized a fourth voice was laughing as well.

"Don't mind me, I miss hearing about pranks like that," Lupin walked through the door quietly, and had Tyler with him. Briefly, the Second Year wondered if the latter was meant to protect everyone else from the former. Then he realized that if that were the case, the Ministry would know about the lycanthrope, and the man would have had a much harder time getting onto school grounds in that case.

That thought led to the mental question, if the Ministry didn't know Lupin was a werewolf, why hadn't he been put in the man's care? For that matter, where had the man been all this time?

"If you modify your charms on the Singing Sticks," the taller redhead was holding an example of said item, "You could put them into the water glasses. That way, when the kids take a mouthful of water, and then eat a candy, you'd have singing critters."

"And why are you helping them?" the werewolf shot a look at his coworker.

"I'm just offering a suggestion, not telling them the specific charms." Tyler smirked.

"So you do know your spells," Fred breathed.

"I should hope so," the man scoffed, "I've not only got a Defense, Rune, and Arithmancy Mastery in the works, but I've been employed by Gringotts for the last three years."

The droll look on the older man's face left the Second Year wondering if Gringotts' was the only place that employed Bill's possible replacement, but decided to focus more on the tasks at hand. Namely getting their prank pulled together for use at dinner. And finding out why he'd been left to the Dursleys, if Lupin knew.

"So why are you two venturing in here again?" George was gathering a pile of sweets together to give to the House Elves once they'd been talked into helping.

"We tried to investigate this room for sneaky rats, but there are enough sneaky items in here already that most spells throw fits," the time-worn adult sighed, "I don't suppose you three would happen to know why, would you?"

Three grins met his gaze, and a chuckle floated in the air from Lupin's partner. "You three are definitely Weasleys by blood, and nature." As the three children looked at him, the man peered around the room some more, "I've heard that this room has been the Headquarters to

two generations of Marauders. That leads me to suppose that you three are the second."

"Well, in that case, knowing that, er... Lupin was one of our predecessors, I have to ask," Fred looked at his twin.

"Is there any way we'll get the map back?" George begged.

"Slim to none on your chances boys," Lupin chuckled this time. "Unless you've got one of your own in the works."

Harry's gaze shifted around the room, and after a brief pause, Tyler burst out laughing again, "Looks like the youngest triplet's trying for your title."

"I don't mind," chancing a glance, the dark-haired boy was rather surprised at the warmth. Now he really wanted to know why he hadn't been taken into the custody of the werewolf, if the Ministry didn't know.

"Sir?" Hoping it wouldn't be seen as sucking up, the boy hesitated.

"Yes, Mister Potter?" Lupin blinked, gaze gone distant.

"Why was I left in the care of the Dursleys?" At this point the twins flinched, and the red-headed adult blinked blankly.

"Dursley? As in Vernon?" the growl in the man's voice was new, and wouldn't be frightening itself if it weren't teamed up with the amber eyes gliding closer to gold.

"Keep calm," Tyler suddenly had a different air about him as well. He'd gone from fairly harmless to, well, Harry had the feeling that he could hold his own, even against a lycanthrope lost in his anger. It left the youth puzzled as to which adult to be more frightened of.

"Why?" Harry chanced.

"Judging by the fact that you weren't bragging about them, you're not happy where you are. I also noticed you're rather small for twelve

going on thirteen, and those glasses look like they might have been scavenged from your father's collection." Lupin listed, "I've also heard gossip on the grounds about your issues with this year's events, and that some think it ironically timed to match your return from seeing the non-wizarding world with the eyes of a wizard."

"So how did he wind up with those horrible Muggles?" Fred demanded.

"It's a frightfully long story, and I'm not sure you three have time to hear it before your next classes," the greying wizard prefaced, "But the short of it is that I graduated from Hogwarts about fifteen years ago. Peter Pettigrew was one of my very few friends. Shortly after graduation, two of my other friends married, and about twelve years ago, they had a child. Several things lined up in such a way that none of us truly trusted each other any longer, and then the friends with a child had to go into hiding. They chose another friend to guard the secret of where they lived, and were betrayed. They were killed, and their little boy was orphaned. For the last ten years, we've thought that the one who did the betraying was in Azkaban, as he should be. News of the sighting of 'Peter Pettigrew' on a map that had been tested for lying has caused that belief to be in question."

"So your friends were Pettigrew, and my dad?" Harry for once didn't mind being so obvious in his ignorance. The twins kept quiet, even though he thought they already knew.

"Peter Pettigrew, Sirius Black and James Potter. Otherwise known as Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," the wince on the man's face reflected the shock, and anger on the boy's, "I take it you've heard of the Marauders pranks?"

"How could you target the Slytherins just because they were Slytherin?" Harry hissed, even while thinking the statement was rather redundant at this point.

"Oh dear," the man leaned forward and rested his arms on his knees. He rubbed his hand across his face. "You not only have heard of them, but you spoke to our charms on the map. Har- Mister Potter, we were stupid children. Not that it excuses our behavior, but

perhaps it will tell you that we have changed. I'll try to be the first to admit that I should have done something to get James and Sirius to focus on things other than tormenting the Slytherins, but at the time, I was more frightened of losing the only friends I'd ever had."

Harry met the man's eyes, and noticed the amber shades moving in the brown. It left him wondering just how strong the moon's pull continued to be. He stared for a bit, and the man didn't flinch. After a bit, he sighed and stared at the stones below his feet. "If you were one of their friends, why didn't I go to you?"

"Blood relations are generally given higher consideration for custody than friends, unless it's specifically stated in a will. I have always been under the impression that Lily and James hadn't had a chance to update their will past leaving Sirius in charge of you should they die." Lupin sighed again, "And obviously, he couldn't do that from within Azkaban."

"That means I don't have a declared magical guardian, right?" Harry jumped on that bit of information.

"Right," the man said hesitantly, "Why?"

"You already know that I want to get away from the Dursleys." Harry explained. He opened his mouth to continue, but was interrupted.

"I suspected, but having the words spoken aloud," Lupin whimpered. "You haven't had a good go at life, have you? Everything about Vernon rubbed Sirius as being Slytherin, so Padfoot made him the butt of a few jokes at both Petunia and Vernon's and James and Lily's weddings. It wouldn't be any wonder to me if the man hated magic because of it."

"You've got that right," Harry drawled.

"I'll see if I can't get him to write down as much information as he knows," the other adult interrupted, "Right about now, though, I think you three should take your supplies, distribute them, and head off to your classes. Just think, if we get this rat caught, your home status should change. After all, you'll likely go to-."

"At this point, I'm not sure I want to," Harry stared at the map still in Tyler's hands, "After all, it doesn't seem to me like he'd react well to my being a Slytherin."

"No, I don't suppose he would," Lupin sighed, "I'm sorry."

"One last thing that gets me though," Harry tried one more time, "If the Ministry doesn't know about your... lunar calendar problems, why couldn't you take me in?"

"I wanted to, but," sheepishly, as out of place on a werewolf's face as it might be, Lupin rubbed at the back of his head, "I still had a lot of growing up to do myself. Frankly, I still might, but if you'll let me, I'll try to make it up to you."

"Growing up to do?" Tyler rolled his head sideways, "What he means with that vague terminology is that even though he fights the wolf's nature with everything he's got, when he lost his adoptive family to the death eaters, it was all he could do to not go feral."

"Eh?" Fred and George, for once, actually seemed nervous.

"In the case of a werewolf, it just means they do their shift, and never shift back. It's like an animagus getting stuck in their animal form," Harry cleared up the confusion on the Fourth Years' faces."

"I still have a hard time remembering that there were and are Slytherins who got as much of a thrill knowing books backward and forward as Ravenclaws did." Lupin shook his head a couple times, then started actively shooing the children out. We'll get the information you need written out and hopefully we'll be able to find a time for a longer chat."

Though he wasn't completely sure he wanted that longer conversation, Harry followed the twins out the door to the Junior Marauders Headquarters and trundled off to class. Distractedly, he realized that the two fake fae that had been on his shoulder had left him alone while in the room by the kitchens. They returned promptly to their posts though, and Lupin snickered.

Rolling his eyes, Harry just headed off to his Charms class. The twins had a little more time to kill before they had class, so they would convince the House Elves to help distribute the Animal Grab Bag of snacks.

Of course, because he was looking forward to the events coming up that he and only four others -he hoped- knew about, Charms moved at a snail's pace. Knowing that the likelihood of any more attacks that year was minuscule to infinitesimal, most instructors had returned to the regularly scheduled programming, er curriculum.

The good news was that the Slytherin Seeker knew the material to be covered in class. Everyone else was encountering the most basic of duplication charms for the first time. Due to his exposure to the twins and incidentally, the paper he'd researched for already, he knew this one. He hadn't had much of a chance to practice the actual casting, but he knew the theory, the history, and parts of the methodology to the spell. Hence, he was working on a more advanced version after three attempts with the earliest.

As the class ended, everyone else was given the assignment to write about history and theory of the spell, and it was to be fifteen inches in length. However, Flitwick left a note on the brunet's desk saying, 'you may either write twice that, using data from our preexisting essay, or you may write fifteen inches of text on the Mitosis or Splitting Charm's history and theory.' To which he gladly took the new path opened. Who knows, it might help him and the twins develop those candies further. Split them smaller, and more could be put in the candy for the space it would take up.

With that in mind, the child figured Transfiguration would take just as long to his mind, but he was pleasantly amazed to see it fly by. That may have been a great deal in part to spending an inordinate amount of time as a sounding board for Zabini, Parkinson, Malfoy, and Nott. The other four were trying to get their miniature ecosystem to have the right kind of life forms in it, and understandably were upset when their 'right type' was failing to reproduce properly.

At the beginning of class, McGonagall had explained that this exercise in Care of Magical Creatures would actually help them with

Transfiguration, as the creatures they were trying to promote were best started with a small group, and would often be subjected to the Mitosis Charm. When they had the proper count of creatures of the desired type, the group was to either transform the individual creatures within set parameters, or to cause all of their ecosystem's inhabitants to conform to the chosen idea, regardless of the desires of their subjects.

The thought had been voiced that they were playing God, but the Transfigurations' Mistress chided the Muggle-born, saying that the 'creatures' in question were transfigured gemstones in the first place, so there were no real lives at stake. She then paused, and added that the worry was a good thought to keep in mind, lest they take for granted the power they had, and were learning.

At the end of class, the groups had only gotten as far as transfiguring the proper number of 'base' creatures. Releasing them, Professor McGonagall indicated that if the two guests of the school completed their task soon enough, she might see her way to convincing one to demonstrate the task they would spend much of the rest of the year completing.

Reaching the Common Room shortly before the third meal of the day, Harry dropped off his supplies, and was greeted by a note thrust in his face. Blinking at it, and trying to read the writing on it, he looked up at the hand holding it.

"Potter, for someone who has no connections, you sure are good at getting a guy the exact things he needs," Bletchley was barely containing his glee. "One of those two Pettigrew Hunters dropped by here a while ago, and said he had something to give to you. He handed me another note, then got a funny look on his face, like he was remembering something." Here the older boy handed a list to the younger, "Then he asked me if I knew why you'd have done so much research on werewolves. What do you know, Potter, but he'd done some research of his own! He's still human, but managed to get a few of them to trust him enough to be allowed to study them. Apparently he's also an animagus, so he can even study them during the full moon. The information he gave me!"

"Pay no heed to Bletchely," Flint thumped the younger teen over the head, as he headed for the Great Hall, "he's been like that since Tyler dropped by."

Grinning, Harry nodded, "I'm not surprised."

"It's just," Flint looked back and forth between the two researchers of all things lycanthropic, "I think it's rather odd that he shows up with that information all of a sudden. Be careful with it, will you?"

The Second Year didn't dare tell the older boys exactly why he thought Tyler had the information he did. Judging by what he'd seen thus far, Tyler had been associated with Lupin, at least for their time in Hogwarts, and therefore had ample time to study the werewolf. Then he remembered the plan for supper, and it took all he had to not grin as widely as Bletchley. That would have killed the surprise of the prank right then and there.

Slytherin House trekked to the Great Hall, sat, and started eating. Momentarily, they started snickering at the members of the other houses turning into cats, dogs, rats and gerbils at random intervals. Up until the point that it started happening to them as well. Harry tried not to choke as he giggled. Thinking that was all that would happen, the boy reached for his water after he returned from being a cat for the third time. Just as he put the glass to his lips, he heard various other students begin uncontrollably singing.

He quickly set the glass back down and shot a glance at first the twins, then Professor Snape, then scanned the room quickly. The first two were puzzled as well, the third was, to say the least, angry, and the preteen had to ask himself who had been behind the singing part. He and the twins hadn't gotten that far in reworking their Singing Sticks.

Then he spotted a grinning redhead that wasn't a Weasley, and blinked. Sitting between Bill, and Lupin, who were also grinning or laughing, Tyler smirked at the Second Year when their eyes met. Suddenly the boy didn't feel like drinking water, or pumpkin juice even. Something told him that there might have been a new kind of monster released upon the school. One that might result in a prank war.

Finished this the night before posting it (oh, I'm sooo behind) so this is rougher than most chapters. Please feel free to tell me about overuse of particulare words through the chapter, (but try to be polite, I'm more likely to remember to make the edits if I'm not focused on laughing at rudeness or grumbling about it) and ask questions.

In a review, someone mentioned having Tyler as an Unmentionable. I'm working with the concept right now, but I might not use that route exactly. Another review asked if I was going to post all seven years in one... story. I don't particularly have an opinion either way, so if you guys think I should divide them, it'll likely be two year spans, and seventh year by itself. Just so I have fewer stories to watch out for. Of course, you need to tell me your opinion, but don't feel like I'm begging for reviews. Though I am... Hee.

February was, thankfully, finished, and the prank war Harry was worried about never surfaced. He was made nervous by the fact that Tyler did replace Bill, but when a little over two weeks passed in March without any pranks, he figured it was safe.

Using that time, on edge as he was, to research some of his pet projects, Harry learned some interesting facts about werewolves from one. Like the fact that each person reacted to his or her affliction differently. Some took to it well, and adapted to the constant fight for superiority. Others spent the rest of their lives in a painful struggle. The Second Year only needed one guess as to which field Lupin fell into.

For every conversation Harry and sometimes the twins had with the lycanthrope, the aging man was accompanied by Tyler. Once, the boy had voiced the question of why and both adults just looked at each other. A sad smile covered Lupin's face as he explained that while the Headmaster had no qualms about Lupin's presence, not all adults felt that way. So a standing rule for their time at Hogwarts was that the werewolf was not to be alone at any time. Outside of bathing and relieving himself, of course.

When March had started, Lupin had left, explaining that his task of proving or disproving Pettigrew's recent presence in the school had been accomplished, and therefore he had to leave. He was still keeping in touch with Harry, however, as they both felt that the adult had a lot to do to make up for eleven years of silence. Thus, Tyler's presence on his own was met with some initial trepidation. Marauder as he may have been, Lupin looked like he'd grown out of that phase. Tyler's sheer glee at the Valentine's Day prank spoke volumes.

The day Harry chose to relax about Tyler's possible prank war challenge, he got up out of bed blearily, and dressed. All in all, normal behavior for him. His day went as normal, near as he could tell, so he didn't think much of anything of catching a passing glance at Professor Snape wearing a green band around his wrist. As far as he knew it had always been there. Nor did he think anything of Instructor Tyler- the man had refused to be called 'Professor'- wearing a green tie for his hair, because the girls of the House had noticed it on the

first day of March. He would come to regret that shortly after lunch, but how was he to know what was coming?

"Today has to be the best day ever for Slytherin," Flint chortled as the House settled in at their table for the midday meal. "I don't know what's going on, but I've heard that almost all the people in the other three Houses are getting pinched like mad. They can't figure out who's doing it, and it's infuriating them beyond belief!"

"It hasn't gone after any Slytherins has it?" Landale was paying half her attention to Flint.

"Not a one," Bletchley sighed, "I'd be happier about it, but the others are completely sure that one of us is behind it."

"You said almost all," Derrick pointed out, "The ones that haven't been pinched, what do they have in common?"

"They're all Mu-ggle born," a quick glance down the table told Bole that Harry was paying attention, so he edited his word choice.

"What could a Muggle born have in common with Slytherin House?" Montague grumbled.

"Well, it's not all of the Muggle borns, since Granger is getting pinched too." Malfoy's voice was filled with a frightening amount of glee.

On a sudden lark, Harry glanced over at the Gryffindor table. He noticed that nearly all of them were wincing, rubbing at spots on their arms. Thomas was among the only ones of that House whose name Harry knew that wasn't rubbing at anything. In fact, he was smirking at most of the rest of his House. When he pointed at Granger, Harry noticed a green band on his wrist and remembered Professor Snape first thing that morning. He glanced at the twins, who were laughing at everyone else, wearing little bits of green in their ears, and suddenly felt like whacking his head into the table.

"Potter?" Parkinson had evidently been watching him, and noticed his expression change.

"What day is it?" Harry wanted to make certain that his hunch was right. He didn't even want to glance up at the Head Table, as he was almost willing to guarantee that every one of the people up there, from Hagrid to the Headmaster, would be wearing something green.

"March seventeenth, why?" Goyle looked at the brunet oddly from his end of the seating arrangement.

"I don't know if it carries over to the magical world like Valentine's Day, but Saint Patrick's Day is supposed to be an Irish holiday--" Harry started.

"Oh yeah, it carries over," Malfoy snorted, "Rather, they took what they understood of the holiday and warped it. Like they do with all of them. Good grief, all the merchandising."

"For Muggles, if you're not wearing something green on this day, it's a general rule or right or whatever that those around you that are wearing green, something green." Harry paused, "That they can pinch you. I think that's why we and some of the Muggle borns have been exempted. One of our house colors is that very hue, and the Muggle borns, well."

At that point, Harry chanced a glance up at the Head Table. He caught Tyler's smirk and had just enough time to remember he'd shoved a green hair tie he'd 'accidentally' liberated from Parkinson's last band-flinging spree and put it on his wrist when the rest of the house started yelping. A quick glance at them revealed the green in their ties had been turned into black. Shooting a look back up at the Defense instructor revealed a cheesy grin that faded a second when Harry snapped his wrist with the band. Even though he hadn't been trained in it, Harry could read the 'next time' that Tyler spoke at him through the air. To which, the Second Year figured, 'not if I get you first.' The others in his House spent the rest of the day alternating between whining about Harry not warning them soon enough, and trying to remove the band on his wrist. 'Just for the sake of it,' was their excuse.

The rest of March was spent in planning for Harry, Fred, and George. When the twins revealed when their birthday was, they figured they had the best reason to pull a prank. They weren't sure if they could get Instructor Tyler, but they sure were going to try. If nothing else, the prank war was at least going to start, maybe end, with a bang.

Though they were focused on their prank ideas, they did learn quite a few other things. They had slowly figured out that Lupin's guess as to who was Harry's Magical Guardian was accurate. As in, the boy had none. Thus, he was quietly working with his Head of House to get someone declared. Especially someone who wasn't in the Headmaster's pocket. This conversation occurred after Harry asked why nothing had happened yet to solve his summer issues.

That was when the preteen learned that most of the people teaching at Hogwarts had documented various things that the Headmaster had done, not done, said was done while lying through his teeth, or just generally mislead others about. Teaming that with the misplacement of Harry's complaints about the Dursleys, Madame Pomfrey's complaints about said child's health, and the strange occurrences of the last two years, and they felt they had just about enough to do something with.

Unfortunately, they weren't sure if it would be worth it to get the man removed. After all, who could guarantee that the person chosen to replace him wouldn't be worse? They were also worried that if they started raising a fuss about current affairs, the Ministry would start to question all of the Headmaster's decisions, right up to and including suggestions for teachers of the school, the appointment of a Deputy, and the designation of a Nurse.

When those questions were voiced, Harry realized what a web the aged man had woven about himself, and was left wondering how much of the man's display of benevolence to believe. He'd have become obsessed with the thought but for the next Quidditch game, which was Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff. The only reason he didn't ignore it was because the twins were determined to make use of the day.

After a bit of thought, he remembered that it happened to fall on March thirty-first, so the trio could finalize their plans, and put together elements. Not too many, or an enterprising student or teacher could happen upon them and mangle the whole lot. Perhaps even change their purpose.

That was why, when they could be out in the stands, cheering on Hufflepuff, and yes all three favored Hufflepuff over Ravenclaw, they were setting select stones in the Defense Hall to transfigure things into giant shoes, starting roughly twelve hours from that time. Something they wouldn't have been able to do, if not for Lupin's support of their revenge against the prankster teacher. His letter had said, 'I never suspected such a sense of humor in the man, but why not? He'll have to learn some way not to challenge the son of a Marauder and two self-apprenticed second generation Marauders.'

Finally deciding they were satisfied, they left a slew of simple charms over the top of what they'd already placed, intending for them to be spotted. What wasn't removed would only add to the fun. They then dashed to the Quidditch pitch and were just in time to see the Hufflepuff Seeker swoop in to catch the snitch, right from under the Ravenclaw Seeker's broom. It turned out to be a false alarm, but the female Seeker didn't seem to catch on in time, and bounced off of her counterpart as she tried to mimic his maneuver.

"Almost have to wonder if she's too busy staring at her opponents to actually play," Harry muttered. Luckily they hadn't come up in a predominantly Ravenclaw section of the stands.

"Maybe," Fred smirked.

"She doesn't seem to have any problems flying circles around poor Seelie," George chuckled. At least, he did until said Seeker knuckled him in the ribs.

"I'm not that bad, Beater One!" she yelped.

"Beater One?" Harry asked.

A little pink in the face, she pointed at the twins, "So sorry, can't tell them apart. So for game days I beg one of them to wear a one and the other a two, somewhere on them, so I can for just that one point in time. Hence the Beater One and Two syndrome."

"You should learn to tell them apart," Harry suggested.

"Well the only way I've thought of so far leads to people getting funny ideas." Seelie muttered, "Did you know that one of the twins has forty-seven freckles on his nose, and the other has thirty-three?"

Wide-eyed, the twins stared at her. To which, she pointed saying, "I rest my case."

Feeling like stirring the pot, "See if you can't figure out which of the twins has a picture made out of the freckles on his nose." Harry laughed as both Weasleys started staring at each other, trying to spot it for themselves. And going cross-eyed to look at their own face.

"Hey, is that what you use to tell them apart?" Seelie asked.

"Used to be," the Second Year couldn't stop laughing. It only got worse when the rest of the students in the stands started moving around, trying to jostle for better cheering places. The twins now had to deal with people crossing between them and interrupting their picture hunt. "You two can relax. If there's a picture on your nose, I haven't spotted it. I just used to use the fact that Fred has a fairly straight line of freckles crossing his nose along the midpoint, and George doesn't, to identify you."

"Now what do you use?" George was staring at said line of freckles on his brother's nose.

"Twins as you are, your voices are just a bit different from one another." Shrugging, the Slytherin qualified that statement, "At least to someone who spends a lot of time around you in unguarded settings."

"Ah," the synchronization was back, and oddly, settled Harry's nerves.

"Hm," Seelie shook her head, "I think I'll keep to my game day numbers game, considering I'm probably, hopefully going to be replaced as Seeker next year."

"Oh?" Fred spoke up.

"Yeah," Seelie sighed, "I grouch about not being as bad as everyone says, but I really am. I'd need about four times as much training to just catch up to you guys, as far as skill goes. But I can't spend that much time training. I need too much time for studying, just to keep up there too."

"Please tell me you've told Wood," George whimpered.

"I'm mad, not stupid," she grumbled, "Though, judging by the fact that he seems to think I'd be good enough to pick my own replacement, maybe I'm just a glutton for punishment. After all, which Second Year or older that hasn't already been denied would be willing to try? And I can't exactly get an exception to the no First Years rule made to test them and train them, can I? Even if I should be the one to train them."

"Who says you need a broom?" Harry asked.

"Eh?" George blinked, "How else can you tell they're a good seeker?"

"A good Seeker can be taught to fly, if they've got the will for it," Harry spoke from experience. "The Slytherin team got me up to a decent level at it, after all. But if they can't spot the Snitch, they don't stand a chance. The easiest way to know they can see it is to charm things to be shiny and to fly around. Keep them within parameters that people can jump after, and you should have a decent test for even First Years."

"Hm," the girl thought, "I bet I could throw that suggestion to Wood, so he could use it in future."

Loud cheers distracted the quartet, and Harry spotted the Snitch flying past, even as Ravenclaw's Seeker flew one way, and Hufflepuff's the other, both in the wrong direction. Following the fluttering device with his eyes, he almost didn't notice when it flew

past the Headmaster's section of the audience. The old man was sitting with the rest of the Professors, but there was a strange man also in the stands. Short, pudgy, balding, and seeming to do everything he could to seem important. The boy had to wonder why he bothered when he was obviously kowtowing to Dumbledore.

After a bit of pondering, Harry poked Fred in the shoulder gently, to catch his attention. Then he pointed out the pudgy man and asked who it was. Hearing that it was the Minister of Magic himself left the Second Year more than a little depressed, though he tried not so show it. He and the twins had a few more sections of the school to set up that day, and they'd focus on trying to cheer him out of a funk if they noticed.

"Harry?" George seemed to have realized his mood anyway.

"The Minister's in Dumbledore's pocket, isn't he?" biting his lip, Harry asked.

"Sort of," Fred muttered back, "If he can find a way to discredit the Headmaster, he'll go for it, take the glory, and try to claim it was all his work in the first place. We've wanted to know if he was one of the Stupid Slytherins for ages, but some of the things he does are so pathetic, I can't believe he'd have made it through Hogwarts at all!"

"So you figure his ambition wrote over any intelligence he had?" the Slytherin tossed out the idea he'd had forming.

"Don't try to go to him for your custody problems, Harry," George shook his head worriedly, "He'll put you with the person who lines his pocket best. And I know you don't get along with the Malfoy in school."

"I'd just like to find someone I can trust, who'll won't be in it for the fame." Harry noticed the twins' sad smiles, "Not that I don't want to be in your family's care, but your parents wouldn't let me pay them back for this summer, no way would they let me reimburse them for a longer period of time."

"You'd find that to be true for any family that isn't in it for the fame," Fred sighed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see a discussion between the Minister and the Headmaster, and it didn't look exactly friendly. The more that the former grinned, the more of a sinking feeling that the Second Year got.

"Guys, what would make that Minister grin like a cat that got the cream?" he asked, not taking his eyes off the conversation.

"Definitely, in this case, getting one up on Dumbledore," Fred suggested, looking over.

"Or having proof of the Headmaster doing something out of his jurisdiction," George added, also looking.

Harry's eyes flew wide when both adults glanced their way. The Minister's smirk widened, and the boy felt like he actually knew what they meant when people sometimes said, 'someone just walked on my grave.' Getting nervous, he made to stand and leave. The twins, not about to leave him to wander the school by himself

Back inside the main part of the school, Fred grimaced, "That is not good."

"Say that about ten times more, and you'll have the way I feel," Harry sighed, rubbing his forehead.

"Mister Potter," Professor Snape's voice made all three boys jump. They turned to look at him and he nodded tightly, "The Headmaster was speaking with Minister Fudge concerning his actions of the last two years. To the effect of feeling as though signs were pointing to his own dotage, and he thought it best if the Ministry began looking for a new Headmaster soon. He made the suggestion of Professor McGonagall, but the Minister cut him off, saying that the school didn't need a Headmistress that would follow in his path."

"So, Fudge is going to appoint a new Headmaster?" Fred's voice had a rather distinctive squeak to it.

"Seems that way," Tyler had also wound his way down from the stands. "Never have I been more glad that I had only signed on to finish the year. The person that man will choose to replace the current Headmaster would probably be of the mind that my job is more or less a waste of time now."

The trio of students were more than a little nervous, and when the Potions Master told them to go their own ways, they followed directions a bit blindly. This mood carried on through a few more hours, but when supper for the day was finished, they reconvened and finished placing their prank devices.

That night, before drifting off, Harry realized something that had him planning a more thorough set of pranks. He'd been willing to leave his head of House alone out of respect, but what those two had pulled meant war.

To warn you all, I'm finally realizing why I've fallen behind lately. I'm working without a solid outline, and I've learned the hard way what a bad idea that is for me. So, when I finish this 'year,' I will take another break, sorry. Hopefully it won't be a long one, but I want to outline the third year, take stock of the responses in regards to posting year sets or all in one story, and get a few (read lots) of chapters ahead. After all, I owe you guys a free chapter for 750, 1000, and 1250 reviews. (Okay, so the last hasn't happened yet, but I'd like to think I'll get 35 more reviews between now and posting the final Second Year chapter.)

Let's see, one person reviewed saying that the prank war was a good idea, as long as it didn't take over. So sorry, it just might be the driving force for the finish of Harry's Second Year. After that, I'm fairly sure it'll die off. Well, not become nonexistent, but it won't take over the whole story.

Last chapter I commented on a reviewer suggesting Tyler be an 'Unmentionable.' Er,... yeah, you guys caught that one. I meant to type 'Unspeakable,' really, and I swear, when I typed it, it was right. But when the first person pointed it out, I looked, and D'oh! So, sorry to the reviewer I misquoted. Not to mention I should be dead from

laughter about five times over because of your responses. I didn't doubt that you guys read these, as wordy as they may get (Sorry!) but that was yet more proof.

Waking early enough to hate himself, Harry forced himself out of bed anyway. He had to plot out how to get back at the two professors for their early start on the day. For all that he would have neither class, he was still going to make sure that both men knew what they'd gotten themselves into.

During breakfast, he ate his oatmeal slowly, as though he were dreading something. It wasn't far off the mark, as Professor Flitwick had professed plans of his own for the class this day, though not everyone would have the same conclusions to draw regarding his dread. On the way to class, he passed the twins and slipped a note into one of their pockets. They had both classes that day, and thus the message was for them to play up the fear the conversation with Tyler and Snape had caused. He'd explain during lunch if they needed it, but figured the paper would be all the clues they'd want.

Charms itself started about the way Harry thought it would. Flitwick stepped up to the front of the class and told them they were getting a pop quiz. Passing the paper around, it read: 'Write your name on the top and then follow the instructions.' After that it gave a list of tasks, and Harry skimmed them all before writing anything down besides his name. He was partially distracted by the other students standing up and making noises at various intervals, but kept reading. When he returned to the top and began to take it seriously, he read the first instruction, which said, 'Read all of the instructions before carrying any out,' and began rereading them. He had to try not to laugh when he read the last, 'Ignore all instructions but the first, and turn your paper over.' So he turned his paper over and sat in his seat as the rest of the class continued 'following instructions.'

One of the teachers back in Surrey had once done this prank, though not on April Fools' Day. Harry had been a much slower writer then, and had just gotten as far as reading the first actual rule when most of the class had started making noise. At the time, he'd blinked, skipped through the list, and caught a glimpse of the last rule. By the time he'd finished reading that, the teacher had already begun chastising the class. Luckily, Dudley had been an even slower reader than Harry, and had still been reading the first instruction out loud to himself at that point. The teacher called upon him as a fine example of students following instructions, and had left Dudley's cousin alone.

Shuddering slightly at that memory, Harry looked up at Professor Flitwick, who smiled. The paper in front of him suddenly had writing on it. 'I've heard you asking about Wizarding holidays and their traditions. As the current History instructor is more than a little unreliable in that regard, ask me after class, and I will write you a pass to the library for selected texts.' There was a list, and then further notations that indicated that if the boy asked for the pass, he'd have a forty-eight inch scroll to turn in by the end of the year, covering the major holidays for each month of the year. Sighing, Harry tried to argue himself into or out of the idea. The final mark for the plan was the ability to use some of those holidays against the Defense instructor and the Potions Master.

A little later, Flitwick revealed the trick to the quiz, and that it wasn't actually worth any points, in honor of the holiday. The Pureblood children muttered about Muggle-ification, and Harry suspected another possible source for the paper he'd have to turn in soon.

The class discussed the Sizing Charm, and its cousins the Swelling and Engorgement Charms, focusing mostly on the increasing degrees of difficulty between the three. Flitwick demonstrated the Sizing Charm, and then class ended. On the way out Harry collected his pass, resolving to use the next library session for researching both the holidays paper he'd just earned himself, and the twelve inch essay on the three charms that had been assigned to the class.

Starting Herbology with a stern expression, Professor Sprout indicated that she had no intention of pulling any pranks, as they were to be discouraging the Mandrakes from popping up to complain about their spots.

They wore the earmuffs for the entire time, as they'd had to resort to them for class meetings in that greenhouse. Using an interesting spell, the Herbologist explained their task, with the words appearing in the air in easily read letters.

All of Hogwarts' Herbology students were being held responsible for the care of the Mandrakes at this time. Most of the time, students were making sure that the plants were staying healthy. After the first

couple had forced themselves out of the ground and wailed, scrabbling at the portions of their stalks that most resembled faces, it had been time to seriously guard them. They had one more stage before they could be sliced and made into the necessary potion to restore the ghost, cat, and students that the Basilisk had petrified. After the third or fourth time they'd been reminded of that in class, most students began tuning it out, or rather, not reading the words in the air.

It was in this class period that Sprout explained the importance of ensuring that the Mandrakes weren't allowed to scratch at or otherwise personally remove their acne. Sometimes their efforts could result in scarring, and that scarring was less of the plant that could be used for the potion. The scar tissue was useable, but not in a potion she wanted to see any of her students making, using, or even researching.

Professor Sprout demonstrated the method of keeping the shrubbery below the soil of their lodgings, and Harry was fairly certain he saw some of the other students giggle. Though he didn't laugh, he guessed it was humorous to watch the generously proportioned woman swing a small mallet at the top of the plant as it started to poke above the ground further than usual.

She then waved them on to their projects, passing the mallets around, and Harry took to watching the pots at his table. The twenty students of the class were divided into four tables, and there were ten pots at each table. Harry supposed that the initial care of the plants had been split between House pairs for the Second Years.

The five students swiftly moved into the rhythm of their efforts. Each had two plants to monitor and thump, though it seemed that Harry wasn't the best thumper, his pair kept coming back up for more, while Crabbe and Goyle had only had to smack theirs once apiece during the entire period. For that matter, across the room, Longbottom had almost all ten tamed on his own. If he'd been less distracted by the Mandrakes, he'd have been able to see if the shy Griffindor had needed his hammers at all.

Class was dismissed, and on his way to lunch Harry noticed the high number of students in the Great Hall wearing huge shoes, or carrying giant footwear. The twins smirked as they sat, and Harry knew he didn't need to explain his plan. He settled in for some more moping, as he ate. A few glances to the Head Table led him to believe that the two professors still thought he believed their words from the day before, and he mentally nodded. When he finished eating, he got up quickly, and asked Parkinson if she'd fetch him from the library if he hadn't returned by ten minutes before class.

A quick showing of the note got him the books he wanted, and the youth packed all but one into his bag, as much as it was guaranteed to hurt his back for the day, it was also guaranteed to work in keeping him awake during History. A little bit of reading told him that in the Wizarding world, the first of April was called 'April's Fool Day,' and was generally a contest between pranksters for who could pull off the biggest prank. Few others got involved. The winning 'Fool' wore a Jester's cap for the next week.

It apparently originated from when even Wizards were led by queens and kings. The royals would require a person to provide humor to the court sessions and demanded people to carry out trials for this job. Over time, the trials became annual, and migrated to the first of April. Eventually, even that was left out of common knowledge, and then the Muggles adapted and modified the day.

A brief thought occurred to him concerning that cap. He wondered who would judge the best prank, and if it were possible to magick said headwear to professor's heads. A quick check of the time told him to head back to the Great Hall, and he made it to the doors at the same time as Parkinson was pushing her way out. She nodded and the two continued to class.

History was boring as usual. Harry read his chapter from the text, taking notes as usual. When he finished that, he pulled out the holidays text again, and began taking notes on the day in May to be celebrated.

It could apparently go by three different names, and each name had different traditions in different cultures. Harry had vaguely heard of

the tradition of dancing around a pole, but the Dursleys had rather frowned on that. So it was no surprise that the boy had never heard of the tradition of making baskets, wreaths and other decorations that would then be delivered to people's doors. And the other two celebrations were even more involved than that.

Class ended, and the students headed to Transfiguration. He didn't really figure McGonagall would pull a prank, and was glad to be proven right. She mentioned having some of her students arrive with overlarge shoes on their persons, or as supply bags, and explained that in that case, they were going to learn shrinking in the class.

"Technically, this could be covered in Charms, but as we're actually just transmuting the size, it will do." The stern woman began. "We've already covered Transfiguring something smaller into something larger, and I've heard that this is the point in time where you cover Charms that do much the same. It only follows that you learn how to reverse the concept."

She stalked around the room and placed a large text on each student's desk. When she had finished, she told them, "These books are in fact, pamphlets that will be used later in the year to inform incoming Muggleborns of the school, its history, and what magic is. Your job is not to transfigure the books back into the pamphlets, but to shrink these giant tomes into the size range the pamphlets originally were."

A few minutes into the task and Harry realized something. The Muggle born children were doing much better at this than the Wizard born. Harry hadn't a clue any more than his Housemates, and after a bit of frustration, called attention to himself through a hand in the air.

"Mister Potter," Professor McGonagall walked over to his desk and nodded.

"Ma'am, I can't really begin trying to do this, I don't know the size of the pamphlet." The boy bit his lip, "This was something sent to Muggle borns, so those who were raised by wizards or just left ignorant wouldn't know anything about it."

"Ah yes," A slight smile on her face made the boy wonder if that was her prank, "I knew I had left something out." A brief chant and wave of her wand and the text on his desk became the flyer she had spoken of. "That should do. The reversion will last for two minutes, so take the time to study it well."

Harry was tempted to ask her if there was a way to get a copy of it for his own interests, but resolved to trying to make the pamphlet return to its original size in a short time. While he was studying it, he picked it up, flipped through, and just kept it in his hands. He was luckily warned by the pages warming in his fingers before it swelled back to its Transfigured size.

After that, it wasn't very difficult to achieve the goal set. With the time remaining, Harry skimmed through his text for a spell that would make something into a hat, preferably a largish one, that could take extra spells, and would remain in that state for a while.

Giving up, Harry sighed, and looked around. More or less accidentally, he caught the Transfiguration Professor's eye, and she strode over to his desk. "Mister Potter, did you need something?"

"I'm looking for a spell that will make a hat, and let it stay that way for a while, that will let me cast other spells at it." The boy began explaining.

"How many other spells?" she asked.

"I'd like one to place a word on it, one to keep the word there, and maybe a third to make it difficult for someone to arbitrarily remove," Harry counted.

"If you're doing what I think you're doing, you'll also need a durability spell, and one to prevent reciprocation," McGonagall shook her head. "That level of Transfiguration is beyond your skill. You're doing quite well, of course, but what you want is something that is more than you can accomplish. For one thing, your target is, as of now, a great deal more powerful than you, with even more control than he has power, and almost as much knowledge as the Potions Master in his chosen

field. Presuming you're desiring to attach this hat, word and all, to the head of a certain instructor."

"Eh," sheepishly, the preteen glanced at his professor. She had a slightly less sharp expression on her face, and he got the feeling she was going to help him out.

"I would suggest you speak to the Headmaster during Supper, or just as you get out of class. He will be returning from the trip he made to the Ministry at about that time. I'm not completely certain of the details, but he missed yesterday's game for a negotiation with the Minister." With those last two sentences, the Head of Gryffindor gave him all the proof he needed for his conclusion from the night before.

"I have one more question," Harry held out a finger. "How did Tyler get Professor Snape to help him?"

"I believe that Instructor Tyler may have used his talents with creating illusions in that regard." Professor McGonagall responded. "And being a Ward Setter, the man probably set something on the field that would cause latecomers to the game to see an illusion of his choosing. I've heard he's rather skilled at Anti-Muggle Wards."

All that told Harry was that the man knew how to craft illusions, and those details left him needing to consult the twins. Shortly after she left his desk, McGonagall released the class. As they filtered out, the rest of the Slytherins crowded around him, and Malfoy spoke up.

"What were you talking about?" the reserve Seeker demanded.

"Instructor Tyler told me something yesterday that I am doubting the truthfulness of today," Harry sighed. "And I thought of showing him this by carrying out the Wizarding tradition for April's Fool Day, at least as much as I can."

The others wearing green and silver badges chuckled. Harry talked Crabbe and Goyle into venturing to the Headmaster's office with him, and noticed that the last paper he'd tucked into his bag had the word 'Gobstoppers' written on it, in McGonagall's writing. So, when they

reached the gargoyle Harry had only seen in passing, he looked at it, sighed, and said the word out loud.

Crabbe and Goyle both looked at him strangely, but then all three gaped as the statue moved out of the way, revealing a staircase that shortly after began moving. They climbed on, and rode the stairs up to the Headmaster's office. Once there, they were greeted by Dumbledore himself.

"Ah, to what do I owe this visit?" Professor Dumbledore pushed his glasses up his nose. All three boys were a bit shocked by just how old the man seemed. They'd heard he was well over a century, but at this time, he almost looked like he was pushing a millennium instead.

"I asked Professor McGonagall about transfiguring something into the shape of a hat, that would let me cast a few spells on it, to use on Instructor Tyler," Harry explained once more what he had planned.

"I see. Well, I have to agree, that your requirements are beyond your abilities at this point. A year or three from now, perhaps not, but as of now..." the aged man trailed off. A glance to the right of the boys, and his face brightened a bit. "Well, do you think you would allow yourself to be decorated, and affixed to the head of someone for a day?"

All three boys chanced a glance at what Dumbledore might be speaking to, and spotted the Sorting Hat. It seemed to wake up, and took on a thinking pose. After a bit, if changed his pose, seeming to turn towards the children.

"I suppose it is April's Fool Day again, is it?" the hat spoke. "The last time I was asked to allow myself to rest on someone's head it was that Tyler boy, during his Sixth Year. I spent the entire day on his head, but I still never figured out how he managed to convince the entire Gryffindor Quidditch team that the ground had become the sky and vice versa. So, of course the Weasley brothers, Bill and Charlie, I believe, asked for me to settle on his skull in return."

Trying not to break down laughing, Harry asked, "Well do you want another shot at figuring it out?"

"Ah, he's back again?" Crabbe shivered a little at the sheer glee emanating from the voice of an inanimate object. Then the letters 'Jester' appeared just above the brim of the hat, opposite the side where its mouth was, and it continued, "By all means!"

Treating it with as much respect as possible, Harry nodded to the Headmaster, and all three Slytherins left the man's office. They returned to their Common Room, and dropped off their class supplies. Dashing back out, to try to speak with the twins before the meal, Harry overheard Goyle informing those in the Common Room of what had happened on the other side of the gargoyle.

By chance, Harry met Fred and George at the turnoff just before their Headquarters. Holding up the Sorting Hat, he began explaining. "You two remember our conversation with a pair of educators yesterday, right?"

"Sure," Fred raised an eyebrow, "You were really upset last night, and seemed to still be most of the day. You passed us a note, and we think you've been acting, but I wanted to make sure."

"I figured something out last night, just before going to bed." Harry sighed. "I mean, how often does the Minister trek out to Hogwarts, without a full complement of Aurors for protection?"

Nodding George added, "I thought that was odd myself."

"Second," Harry pointed out, "Since when were either of those two even at the game to have heard or overheard this supposed conference between Dumbledore and the Minister?"

"Nope, didn't see them either," Fred agreed. "You've got another point though, I can see it."

"I was under the impression that the Board of Directors appointed Headmasters, and finalized the appointments of Professors." Harry led into his perhaps final point.

"As far as Dad's explained it, yeah," Fred nodded.

"So I suppose that means them saying that Fudge telling the Headmaster off about all that is just something they made up to prank us," George narrowed his eyes. "That's what you're getting at, right?"

"Exactly," Harry noticed the look the twins passed between them, and when they looked back at him, he knew they'd figured it out, but had hoped he had too. It was nice to have everyone at the same level of understanding.

"So I suppose they made those mistakes so we'd figure it out," Fred sighed.

"They, or at least Tyler, want us to do something in return," George scratched his chin, "But what?"

"I don't know what he or they want," Harry grinned, and held the Hat up again, "But I know what I'm going to do."

"Isn't that the Sorting Hat?" George pointed.

"It's rude to point, George," the hat spoke. Both twins gaped. "Ah yes, a trip in your skull makes it quite impossible for me to not know who you are."

"Oh," Fred seemed a little paler than usual.

"What exactly are you doing with the Sorting Hat?" George demanded.

"And why does it have the word 'Jester' on its backside?" Fred queried.

"You know how Muggles celebrate the first of April, I'm sure." Harry started.

"Of course," Fred grinned.

"With our Dad?" George shook his head.

"How could we not?" Fred sighed.

"And Wizards, apparently used to hold annual festivals to decide who would be the King's Jester," Harry pointed out, and watched the rest fall into place on the twins' faces.

"So the hat's for Tyler?" Fred seemed half disappointed and half excited.

"Too bad we daren't take it for ourselves." George matched his twin's expression. As usual.

"Well, I look at it as a bit of a prank in return," Harry shrugged, "After all, he's in a seat of authority. How seriously can anyone take him when he's wearing a hat on his head that tells everyone he's a prankster?"

"But how are we going to keep it on his head?" Fred wondered.

"Leave that to me," the Hat spoke up once more, "Head on to the Hall, boys, I've got a skull to stick to."

"You've got the ability to do that for yourself?" George's eyes didn't look like they could go any wider.

"I was created during the era where this holiday originates," a snort indicated its view on the matter, "Of course I can stick to a person's head and declare to the world that they are the King's Fool!"

Deciding to go for theatrics, the trio stalked down the middle of the Great Hall as a unit, a twin on either side of Harry. As they approached the Professors' table, more and more students stopped whatever they were doing and watched. Each adult at the table, with their own expression, looked up as well, observing the trio with expectant eyes.

Except for Instructor Tyler. When they reached the table itself, the three boys noticed a puzzled look on his face, and a cautious one on Professor Snape's. As they neared the Defense Teacher, his puzzlement turned into disconcertion.

"You three spend plenty of time together, I presume there is a reason for this united front?" Snape spoke up when the boys stood still.

"You told us something yesterday, that at the time, rather ruined my day." Harry started. "Then I realized you'd just gotten a head start on today."

Tyler's eyes flickered. "You're sure of that?"

"Professor McGonagall told me herself that the Headmaster had missed the game." Harry smirked.

"Besides, Fudge doesn't go anywhere without at least four Aurors," Fred chimed in, adding more details than Harry had known.

"And it's rather unlikely that they would have allowed two professors to over hear what the two were discussing," George added his own thoughts. "If they were going to talk during an event like that in the first place."

Sighing, Tyler nodded, "Well at least you figured it out. I was rather worried, with your reactions throughout the day. Wait, you said you'd known this since yesterday?" Three nods. The resignation turned into discomfort, "That means you three have spent all day planning something."

"Of course." Snape warned his seating neighbor, "The Misters Weasley are always planning something, and Mister Potter has become their equal in plotting. Whether he plots in the same way is anyone's guess, but I would suppose they have something for you."

The man's discomfort started to look like worry. "As long as it doesn't have coconut. I'm allergic, and it tastes disgusting."

"No sir, not a pie," George was trying not to laugh.

Harry pulled the Hat from behind his back. As it moved, the rest of the student body saw it, and gasped. That led Tyler to lean back. When he saw the Sorting Hat, he groaned, "Not again. The two years I try to

lighten the atmosphere, I get the Hat. What did I do to get people who are willing to look up Wizarding Holidays and use them against me, not once, but twice?"

"Does that mean you're going to stop with the pranks?" Fred's face said he hoped not.

"I doubt it." The redheaded adult reached for the Hat, and muttered under his breath as it jumped to his head. "I was actually asked by the eldest Weasleys to lighten the atmosphere. Go figure."

A bright flash had the Defense instructor, blinking rapidly. Ginny Weasley giggled as she ran out of the room, holding Creevey's camera. She twittered something about getting permission from the boy when he was returned to normal. It had to have been a signal, as the rest of the school began laughing too.

"I'm so glad I wasn't demanding much more than that they listen and do their work," the 'triplets' heard as they left the two Professors be, and headed for their own tables.

Midway through the meal, the Headmaster stood up, and pointedly not looking at Tyler so as to not be incomprehensible during his impromptu speech, he began, "I would first, like to award the twins Weasley five points apiece for Gryffindor, for enriching the evening. To Mister Potter, for the same reason, ten points, as his task was measurably more involved. Secondly, I have been in discussion with the Minister for the last few days, regarding events of the last two years, and between the two of us and the proxy from the Board of Directors, it has been decided that a renewing of the wards around Hogwarts is necessary. It is apparently too simple for malevolent individuals to cause harm to our students. Thus, our Defense Instructor has been coerced into investigating the wards. This, hopefully will not interfere with his teaching." Then the man sat back down, saying that the meal could resume, and students may leave if they so desired.

Feeling like that declaration was a little too similar to the joke Tyler and Professor Snape had tried, Harry was nervous about their information proving to be true. It would definitely be typical of

Dumbledore to tell everyone just enough to keep them fascinated with what they did know, so they didn't concern themselves with what they didn't.

The boy stood up from the table, and headed for his Common Room. If he'd stayed any longer, he'd have heard some of the grumbling about how he must have had something to do with the Headmaster feeling he even had to talk to the Minister in the middle of the year.

Tyler's consequences for his prank isn't meant to drop respect levels for him in the eyes of the students. He's really only been trying for enough that they know he knows what he's teaching. That said, he's not really a Marauder or Marauder Junior level prankster. At least, not on a regular basis. He's a planner, with a lot of information to back up his plans, and skilled with wards. His only other year of pranking got him the same result as he just did, so he's not likely to try for a third wearing of the Sorting Hat.

As far as Umbridge goes... I'd dearly love to pretend she doesn't exist. I rather doubt Lupin will be the third year's Defense teacher, but in that case, I don't know who will be. He's currently putting together more details that will help in a certain case that might actually make it to court this time. And its greatest defense is that this is the first time its seen the light of day. Doesn't mean Harry will be happy with the consequences.

I'm leaning toward there being a new leader of the school for the third year, which will probably change a lot of things. We'll see what happens with the outline, when I get that far. But the slow down of the story, (for those that feel it's too slow) stems from the fact that I ran past my outline about ten chapters ago. When I write without one, all kinds of details sneak up on me and demand their air time, even if it doesn't advance the story noticeably.

The next day, a fuming Harry Potter stalked up to the Gryffindor table during breakfast. He glowered at the twins with such a fierce look that most of the students surrounding them were sure that they had pulled a prank on him late the night before. They edged away, figuring that payback would hurt, and might resemble a female dog, but were surprised by what the dark-haired boy said.

“You two didn’t tell me what yesterday really was,” neither twin could quite meet the green eyes flickering back and forth between them.

“What are you jabbering about, Potter, even you knew yesterday was All Fool’s day, you pulled a doozy of a prank on Instructor Tyler!” one of the Gryffindor Chasers countered.

“Yesterday was their birthday!” Harry growled, “And I only just found out because your younger brother was sniping about how I had to be a horrible friend, not doing anything for it!”

Said brother tried to duck under the table.

“Really, Harry,” Fred shot a glare at Ron as George tried to pacify their triplet.

“We figured the prank on Tyler was plenty of a gift!” Fred added, as his twin took his turn glaring.

“Or that you’d figure we were pulling a prank on you,” George decided their previous track wasn’t calming the Second Year down and tried a new one.

“I might not have learned much from the Dursleys, but I did learn you give things to those you care about, and you two calling me your triplet so much left me figuring you were the brothers I never got to have,” Harry said this with a straight face, and wouldn’t be able to explain how later.

“Aw, Harry, that’s an even better gift!” Fred grinned, figuring that Harry was calm enough to relax.

"But I'm still determined to give you something," the smirk made both brothers pause.

"As in?" George asked cautiously.

"Look at your plates," the twins turned and saw that their breakfast food had been replaced by cupcakes with 'happy belated birthday' written on them in such a way that one had to have both together to get the message.

"That's the best you can do?" the twins' friend, Jordan piped up, "They're just cupcakes."

"Short notice," Harry smirked. Here the twins started getting suspicious.

"Hey, Harry, why don't you try a bite?" Fred offered his treat.

Pulling one from the tray sitting on the table, "Don't mind if I do." He bit through it and then laughed as the rest of the students began muttering about the surprise snacks for the morning meal.

Shrugging, the twins bit down on the cupcakes in front of them, and then realized they had been tricked. All one had to do to figure out which was Fred and which was George, would be to figure out who was red and whom was yellow.

"I got the Headmaster, Professor Snape, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick to help me." Harry grinned. "I asked for permission to replace breakfast this one morning, got help in making the spells to transfigure you two so that you and your clothes would be yellow or red for the day, and after a lot of work, Professor Snape agreed to help too."

"I will consider this even for the pranks in my class, for this one day," the Potions Master drawled as he swept past, on his way to his classroom.

Later that week, Harry noticed that the Defense Instructor seemed rather distracted by the task assigned to him. He could sometimes be

seen muttering about this ward or that having fallen into disrepair, or that one or another had become obsolete or defunct. Some days the Slytherin Seeker just wanted to follow the man for the extra information that leaked out.

Meanwhile, the Headmaster was visible during meals, but from mutterings he'd overheard, otherwise off grounds. And though he'd missed the grumblings from the first night after the announcement, Harry knew the older students were upset by the next day.

Shortly after lunch on a day Harry had a night-time Astronomy, Harry was tugged off to one side of the hallway by an older student. When he recognized the other, he relaxed, He then wondered what Wood wanted to talk to him about. He was still nervous, but the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain had treated him just fine at the bookstore before the year started, so he figured he was still safer than the youngest Weasley boy.

"Potter, just so you know, a lot of the folks in my House are unhappy, to say the least with your having gotten the Headmaster as concerned about the wards as he is," Wood warned.

"Are they doing things they shouldn't?" the Second Year thought the older students were getting caught with contraband due to strengthened wards.

"No, usually when Headmasters make declarations like that, it's a sign that they're on their way out of the position," sighing, the older boy qualified, "At least, that's what research has told us."

"Who all is doing this research?" Harry's eyes widened, deciding that Tyler's prank may have been a prank because of the day it was told on, not in the truthfulness of its details.

"Nearly all of the Houses," another older student walked up, this time wearing a yellow and black tie.

"So they're all blaming it on me?" he tried not to grumble, snarl, or otherwise make himself antagonistic, externally, at least.

"Most of the Gryffindor upper years, yes," Wood muttered, "They reckon it's because you're telling tales about your family."

Hissing, the Second Year made to leave, and found Flint glaring at the other boys, with another familiar face standing not far behind him. He thought the girl's name was Penelope Clearwater, but he wasn't going to wager on that.

"Potter," her tones were strained, "I don't want to call you a liar, but neither do I want to believe that you could have been treated so badly by family."

"That's fine, you don't have to believe me," Harry muttered, trying to put Flint between himself and the other three. Flint obviously agreed with this idea, as he helped keep Wood and the Hufflepuff away.

"Diggory, why are you here? Clearwater says she just wanted to make sure Potter didn't try any pranks during May, especially at the beginning," Flint growled.

"I was getting ready to ask some of you older students if I should or not," Harry chanced. "What I've read about the May holidays seemed like a prank would be in bad taste."

"Thank you," the girl Harry was now sure had been the one with Percy and the Gryffindor Keeper nodded, "Some of the older families celebrate one of the holidays, and others celebrate another version of it. The tensions between the two traditions are bad enough that even a well-intentioned prank might set things off. We've certainly asked Instructor Tyler to refrain."

"I was hoping you would," the Second Year shrugged.

"While we were at it, we got him to promise no pranks during June either, for those of us who actually care about our OWL and NEWT scores," she glared at the boys in the conversation.

"The twins and I were working on a prank just for him, that we wanted to use on him as everyone left, but other than that, we'd be happy to back off too." Though he really wasn't sure how the twins felt, Harry

was confident he'd be able to distract them with the prank that was developing in his mind.

"That was all I needed," the girl waved as she left, "I have class, I don't know about you all."

"It's not that we don't believe you," The Hufflepuff spoke up, "It's just that we don't know enough to make a decision. And then there's the possibility that if the Headmaster's gone, we might get someone worse. Did you know that the Minister has an Undersecretary who's voted affirmatively on ALL of the Magical Restriction laws that have come about? All of them, simply because, as she says, 'They're nothing but filthy half-breeds.' Some of those restriction apply to people who inherit a condition that their parents had the recessive traits of!"

"Diggory, we've most of us heard this before, time to get off the soap box," Wood tried to calm the other boy down, "Get to the relevant part of your statements."

"I'm just saying, what happens if she gets the position after the Headmaster, or gets some kind of temporary slot in the school that gives her power?"

"Do you have Magical Creature blood in your family tree?" Harry asked, wondering if he could get Bletchely to talk to Diggory, who now that he looked, he remembered from the Quidditch games as the Hufflepuff Seeker. Go figure, spend all your time near the guy watching for a flickering ball of gold, and you don't recognize him all that well.

"Er," the paling tone of the older boy told Harry all he needed to know, he supposed.

"I'm sorry if we get someone worse than we like," Harry stared at the stones at his feet, "but was I supposed to live with a family that-" he cut himself off, "Sorry."

"Potter!" Diggory hissed, "I don't mean for you to feel like that, I just want you to know the consequences."

"Why do you think I tried to keep quiet as long as I could?" Harry snapped. "I once tried telling a teacher back when I was little. I thought that the teacher would do something, and then the teacher had to leave the school. After that, none of the teachers would even look at me to see the forest for the trees!"

"So you were trying to gather all of your evidence first?" Wood raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, but I didn't do well enough at gathering it quietly," Harry groused to himself.

"One of those times where Slytherins felt the need to cry justice, and did so, before thinking the whole plot through, eh?" Diggory sighed. "Fine. What do you need as far as custody goes? I can't tell him specifically, but my father's in the Ministry. If need be, I can tell him I was thinking of that as another possible career path. He likes that I'm good at Quidditch, but wants me to have a back up plan."

"All athletes should have one," Wood nodded, "In the case of injuries, or age creeping up on them suddenly."

"I've learned that I need to get a guardian that thinks for themselves," Harry tried to give only the absolutely necessary details, "but it's looking like I'll have to go back to the Dursleys this summer at the very least. If nothing else, for more evidence."

"I could have sworn I read something about where you lived," Wood suddenly mumbled, "but I couldn't tell you where it is."

"Why is that important?" Harry was more than a little nervous.

"Might mean someone's put a charm around the address." Flint sighed. "Potter, find someone you trust, tell them the address, and then ask them to repeat it."

"The twins and Ron should know," Harry blinked, "They came to fetch me last summer after all."

"Then get them to repeat it," Flint reiterated, "If they can't, I'll have at least a good idea what charm is over your place of residence. We know that, we can figure out who put it there. With that, we will know who's protecting you only enough for lip service, and we'll have more evidence."

"With any good luck," Diggory seemed to agree with the plan, "We can get you away from there without you getting hurt."

Harry didn't have the heart to tell the young man that it was already too late. The four had to scatter though, because a professor was headed their way. They really didn't need the adult to read the situation for something it wasn't. Or even what it was.

Not letting the conversation be forgotten or obsessed about, Harry went about the rest of his day as he had before. He did, however, send a letter to Lupin. He figured that it would help Diggory, Bletchley, and himself if he got more information regarding the topic.

Midway through May, Sprout bounced into the Greenhouse. As everyone wore the required headgear, she didn't speak, but used her word-spell to relay her lecture. The Mandrakes had finally stopped having major outbreaks, and thus, it might finally be time for the last stage. At this point, students were observing. If they saw a plant poke its head up, they were to observe, up until the point where it tried to hop out of its own soil, and into another's.

Some of the Mandrakes, she said, were prone to indiscriminate hopping, and others were decidedly pickier. There were a few, even, that didn't do any hopping, and Professor Sprout made it a point of reassuring the class that all behaviors were normal, and none guaranteed a better, stronger, or quicker potion.

Each group of students was charged with ensuring their Mandrakes stayed in their own pots. After the initial sightings, the students were to take up the mallets from before, and pop them gently on their heads, to discourage the hopping.

Harry was amused to note that Weasley's Mandrake kept sticking its head above ground only to be scared off by Granger's glare. After the first time she thwacked a Mandrake, the rest in her area were scared of her. Malfoy's seemed to be playing peeking games with the blonde, and Parkinson's and Zabini's, to their dismay, had managed to sneak past their guards.

When called over, the Herbology Professor merely took the now double-occupant pot out of the room. Though the Seeker didn't catch what she muttered, Longbottom was happy to explain to the Slytherins near him, "That just means that next year there might be more sprouts to look after. They're a bit early in the season for it, but who knows?"

"So, Potter, are you even watching your Mandrake?" the second written note sent through the air made the brunet glance up from the clump of greenery in front of him again. He rolled his eyes and went back to watching. He suddenly started giggling at the thought of 'a watched pot never boils,' being modified to 'a watched Mandrake never jumps pot.'

While Malfoy's kept peeking, Harry got to thinking his was actually sleeping. Though a few closer peeks led him to believe something might be wrong. As Sprout hadn't returned to the classroom yet, he gently tapped Longbottom, and cast the question, 'Is there something wrong?'

A brief glance had the shy Gryffindor peering more closely. He poked into the plant fronds of the Mandrake, and then dug a finger gently into the soil. Just then, Professor Sprout walked back in. Longbottom waved his hand in the air, and she hustled over. A brief explanation later, and she left the words 'That's where the other abandoned pot went!'

The rest of the period went by rather slowly, as he no longer had a plant to watch. Well, he thought to himself, it could have been worse. Malfoy grumbling at his Mandrake was mildly entertaining, after all. In a fit of boredom, Harry cast the spell that wrote words, as he'd done several times that class already, but as he saw the words form, he realized he must have said something wrong. Just enough so that his

strange urge to write his name in the air said something else entirely. That reminded him of a game he'd heard older students complain about having to play in their language classes in Surrey.

He kept playing the word game through lunch that day, writing words on paper, and scrambling them around. Then he remembered the boy in the book, Tom Riddle. On a whim, he wrote the name down, and got ready to cast the spell again.

"Potter, what are you doing?" Parkinson snapped.

"In Herbology, I accidentally swapped letters around in a sentence I tried to write," he explained, "And was reminded of a game back in Surrey, that I heard about. They call them anagrams, when you take a word's letters and jumble them."

"So why are you using that name?" she demanded, "We more or less gave up on him. Even if he was in Slytherin fifty years ago, it's obvious he was a nobody."

Personally, Harry rather figured the boy had been someone, as he'd been Prefect during his Fifth Year, but wasn't going to say anything. Her statement may have meant something to do with blood purity, which Harry would never have a clue how to argue. He shrugged and said, "I'm using his name because I'm that bored, that's all."

"Fine then, just cast your little spell," Parkinson sighed.

"What's so important about-" Malfoy read the word formed by the scrambled name, and all three Second Years blinked, looked at each other, and the word again. Harry scrambled to snag the paper up before the other two, and dashed out of the Great Hall. He made for his Common Room, but changed his mind.

"Mister Potter, running in the halls is not allowed," Snape's voice froze the twelve-year-old in his steps.

"P-professor?" Harry turned, cautiously, "Do you remember that ghost's name? The one from the Chamber?"

A quick wave and the man led his student into his office. Not long after, the man nodded sharply, "Do be more careful about those events, Mister Potter. Yes, I remember the boy's name. It was Tom Riddle."

Nervously, Harry handed the man the slip of paper in his hand. A brief pause as the man read it, and he then asked, "Just what does 'Lidde Mort' have to do with 'Tom Riddle?' Or are you leading up to another prank?"

"There's a person going by a name that was rather similar not too long ago, sir," Harry paused, "And reading 'de Mort' reminded me of him. There's no way they could be any relation to one another, right?"

"With the one being a Half-Blood at best, and the other decrying the value of anyone less than Pure Blood?" Snape grumbled.

"But what if, sir?" Harry asked. "What if he was hunting Muggle borns because he felt, I don't know, slighted by his own bloodline? Or his House, since he was in Slytherin."

The long-suffering sigh was the boy's only response for a few minutes. "I will bring this to the Headmaster's attention. Meanwhile, I'm sure you have homework to finish."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Harry skittered out of the room, and returned to the Common Room, completely unaware of the argument going on in the Potions Master's head or the one he'd missed as he dashed out.

This is just finished, or I could say, 'hot off the presses.' Trouble is, I've been working out the details that leave me with a roommate. Not complaining, per se, but it means that I have NO clue how well or badly written this one is. If I get time, between details, classwork, work, and writing the next chapter, I'll iron out any wrinkles pointed out to me. Though I'm disinclined to flesh out the month and change period any further. I'm pushing thirty chapters for this section, and even I am feeling the drag.

The day after his discussion with the Potions Master, Harry wanted to smack his forehead. He'd been told before who Riddle had been, but had forgotten it. He figured himself fortunate that he knew the source of the lapse of memories this time around, and tried to move on with the situation.

Even as he griped about it, Harry's 'little pitchers' remark to the Headmaster proved to have quite the grounding in reality. There had to have been at least one person that had managed to follow him to Professor Snape's office, since everyone in his House was researching Riddle's history in the school directly after the event. They were doing so with a fervor they'd failed to feel the first time the name had surfaced. After reaching the conclusion that anything the others learned wouldn't hurt him, he relaxed.

While the other Slytherins were apparently consulting all possible sources for Tom Riddle's background, they uncovered several secrets of their House. Every so often, roughly each generation, there was a child in the House who was at best, half-blooded. To the Seeker's amusement, they ignored that fact in favor of one individual in particular. It seemed to them rather important to figure out why Harry reacted so vocally to the word 'Mort' in regards to the Head Boy from five decades ago.

Probably only because of his inside knowledge, Harry shook his head, and kept notes on the other students in the House with heritage similar to his and Riddles. The similarities were rather disturbing in each case.

A week after the discussion, Snape pulled Harry aside and asked if the conversation had been staged, and then smirked visibly when the child's expression revealed the answer. Apparently the Head of Slytherin felt the somewhat frantic research was good for his charges, and had figured that Harry had planned with that in mind.

Eventually the matter spread itself around the school, as most subjects do, and by that point, the tale had been stretched to the point that most of the other students were claiming to have been there to hear what the Muggle-born children were calling a 'Eureka' moment.

Luckily, other events were falling into place to keep the Slytherin Seeker from getting frustrated with the attention. The study groups he'd been working at were starting to work out, finally. Percy, though he'd warned that he couldn't next year, was keeping Crabbe, Goyle, and a pair of first Years from falling any further behind in their class work. Wood had taken on a pair of students as well, but they were Third Years, as the Quidditch Captain had no free time when Second or First Years did. The rest of the Second Years had arranged a time to study together, in the Common Room, and after the first time or two, Harry noticed some members of each year sitting in. He supposed the older ones were brushing up, and acting as a final source, to make sure they didn't get confused. The younger were likely trying to get ahead.

For Harry in particular, class work was flowing along like he expected it to, though it was getting a bit more challenging in certain classes.

One day he sat down to work on homework for Transfiguration, and wound up helping a Fourth Year with her Potions homework. When asked why he knew so much, he just reminded her that he'd spent the first month of classes cleaning cauldrons, and getting a side along lecture about why the ingredients had done as they had.

Then the girl had looked at his Transfiguration essay in progress, and she thought she recognized it as something her brother worked on last year, when he was taking his OWLs. This prompted the older students into dragging him into another version of the study group he took part in with his year mates.

"Potter, do you have any idea why they're going out of their way to accelerate your learning?" Flint asked at one point, during Quidditch practice.

"Professor McGonagall said once that there was some important thing that the rest of the teachers thought I needed to be prepared for that the Headmaster was resisting about." Harry sighed, then caught a glimpse of the Snitch and flew off after it.

When they settled back on the ground, the Sixth Year restarted the conversation, "Did she tell you what it was?"

"No," Harry shook his head, "She said that the Headmaster was trying to keep it secret. Then she told me I should ask him directly, and if he danced around it, refused to answer, or just plain ignored me about it, I was supposed to make it clear to the other teachers, and they'd be sure and do something about it."

"Have you?" Flint demanded as they reached the Common Room.

"I didn't need to tell them," Harry smirked, "Professor Snape was in the room when I asked. I'm sure he was quite happy to spread the word in that regard." Harry paused at a sudden thought. "Do you guys think he's coming back? They seem to."

A brief pause occurred as the older students puzzled out who Harry meant. The group conversing almost seemed to double. At least, it certainly was no longer limited to the Quidditch team. While they thought about it, Harry wondered if he'd been too oblique. He didn't like either of Voldemort's commonly used nicknames, and respected his Housemates' discomfort in his chosen name, so he wouldn't use that either. Landale sighed after a bit, when he pointed at his forehead, and then she nodded.

"Those of us that have parents that followed him have grown up knowing what the Dark Mark looks like," Bole grumbled, "And knowing that there's a high chance he'll return."

"Some of us wish he'd hurry up, so we'd still be too young to be expected to join him," Warrington's guilty expression spoke of his view.

"Others wish he just wouldn't come back at all, since it would lose us our parents," Derrick grumbled.

"But we all figure that if and when he comes back, you'll be his first target, or right after the Headmaster," Landale added.

"Why?" Harry asked.

"You're the only known survivor of a Killing Curse," Flint lightly poked the Second Year in the forehead, right on top of the scar there.

"So it would be revenge for then?" Harry rubbed at his head after the Quidditch Captain moved his hand back away.

Evasively, Lochner replied, "Among other things."

The conversation left off there, as the entire group had to dash off to sleep.

Harry received a letter from Lupin in the middle of May. It made a few mentions of progress in finding Pettigrew, as in the rat had been pinpointed to somewhere in Albania. Unfortunately, that was a country deemed unsafe for werewolves, regardless of the Ministry knowing of them or not. Which meant that a superficial watch would be maintained until someone was free to fetch the errant rat.

The former Gryffindor also spoke of wills. He said that if a person could prove they had either been a beneficiary or were related, they could ask about the status of a will. From there the man got rather vague, but it seemed as though he'd made a visit to Gringott's to do just that. The results had been rather startling, as a person Lupin didn't recognize had been named as guardian. The letter ended with reassurance that Lupin would look into it for him.

It was just before the victims of the basilisk were restored that the Potions Master pulled Harry aside for a quiet discussion. Tyler's research had connected with Lupin's, and theirs had later then coincided with his. Lupin had been looking into the person the senior Potters had named as having custody of Harry, while Tyler had been researching wards. The former had discovered that the child's guardian had the final say in the use of protections used on their charge, and Tyler learned that the use of blood wards elsewhere were apparently interfering with the restoration of the school's own protections.

The two began discussing the matter, and realized that their topics had common ground. Word reached the Slytherin Head of House

concerning the matter, and the three had taken the last Hogsmeade weekend as an opportunity to test the wards around Privet Drive. Funnily, they found the place with no problem, but couldn't tell Harry where they'd went afterward. Though they could describe it.

What they had discovered left all three men unsettled, and the child was unashamed to say he was scared. The blood wards that the Headmaster was relying on had been interfering with the wards of Hogwarts for eleven years. At the same time, they had been prevented from performing their own tasks properly for the same amount of time.

During the conversation, it was revealed why.

"I did a bit of research on the matter," Tyler drawled, "and found that Hogwarts' wards are set to prevent the use of blood magics on grounds. That does include the observation of such magics, as that is reliant on some interesting rites that require an initialization which is blood magic."

"So the Headmaster knew what was going on?" Harry asked.

"No," the Defense Instructor shook his head, "It means he's got a device set to your relative's house, to monitor the wards themselves. Should they fall, he'll be about the fifth person to know."

"Who would know before him?" Harry shuddered.

"By rights, your relatives and you, though I suppose he'd be the fourth to know should they fall while you were away." Tyler tapped his chin.

"Thus, as those wards are interfering with one another." Snape smirked, "They are therefore rendered insufficient reason for you to be required to return."

"They might be validated should the Headmaster move his observation device to somewhere off Hogwarts' grounds," Lupin pointed out.

"How likely is it for Dumbledore to do that?" Tyler sighed.

"Should he be removed from his office, then you can be sure he'll take all of his tools with him," Lupin smirked. Somehow, the expression made Harry more worried than any like it on Tyler's face. It reminded him of the Potions Master's smirks. They never meant good things when they showed up.

"Hunh," the Ward Setter muttered, "I can't say that I don't want him to remove his devices, as that will mean my job will finish at the end of term, but at the same time, I feel for your plight, Mister Potter."

"In other news, if you wish to attempt contact with your guardian," Lupin's face returned to its tired expression, "His name is Kane Alen. Unfortunately, that is all I could get as far as information goes."

"Who is that?" Tyler's eyes shifted back to the werewolf, "I thought they would have given custody to someone they knew at least."

"They knew him," Lupin nodded, "Rather, they knew his parents. He would have graduated around the same time as you, I suppose. His parents were involved back then, and were to have been the guardians, but they died about four years ago. The whole family has been dying off, in fact. So the only one who's left, pretty much, is this Kane person."

"Wouldn't it have reverted to someone else?" the Second Year asked.

"Not in the case of a clan like the Alens," Snape stood, "Wizarding families operate in the fashion you are used to, Mister Potter. Clans, however, tend to operate in an entirely different one."

"What belongs to one member is shared amongst the rest," Tyler mumbled absently. "The only thing that is truly belonging to an individual is their name. Even those get shared sometimes, as the clan might have a person given what would otherwise be a title."

"Is there anything about it in the library?" Harry's eyes were wide. He wasn't sure whether he was scared or impressed by the information.

"Here?" Lupin chuckled, "If you ask Madame Pince nicely, she might point you to one of the old ones. But they're so out of date, I wouldn't be surprised if she's withdrawn them by now."

"But why put me in his custody?" the boy couldn't wrap his mind around it.

"Possibly to ensure you would never be alone," Tyler stood, and headed for the door out of the borrowed classroom. "I've got research to do regarding class and the wards. Take care."

At that, the other three parted ways as well, and Harry's mind was filled with more questions than he'd gotten answers. He was so lost in thought that he stumbled into someone. Picking himself off the ground, the boy looked up, only to see the Hufflepuff Quidditch Captain.

"Potter, you might want to watch where you're going. Next time you might run over Mrs. Norris." The older boy's quiet smile turned into a grin when Harry blinked and yelped.

"They're restored?" the Second Year surprised himself by whispering. At the responding nod, Harry sighed with relief. Not that he was looking forward to the camera-happy boy running about again, or the grumpy cat chasing people around, but at least the troubles of the year had mostly been solved. Now, if he could just find information about this Alen clan.

His determination must have been all over his face, as Diggory rested a hand gingerly on the younger boy's shoulder, "Potter? What's got you so lost in thought?"

"Have you ever heard of a clan, called 'Alen?' I just learned of their existence, and was trying to figure out if it would be worth it to further research them in the library," Harry rubbed the portion of his nose that rested directly under his classes.

"Ah, them," Diggory sighed. "There are Wizarding families, and Clans. The families have traditions they follow, like inheritance goes to the eldest child, usually male, and naming patterns. There's one family

that names their boy children for constellations, another that names their girls for flowers. There might even be a family recorded that gives their children the names of important figures of history, hoping that the name will cause something to rub off on the child."

"Oh," Harry had heard about the family and clan part, but it was still interesting to hear details.

"In the cases of clans, they have traditions of their own, and not unlike families, breaking those traditions have consequences. Those consequences can be rather, harsh in others' eyes." The Hufflepuff paused, thinking hard enough that Harry's head felt pangs in sympathy. "I've heard that if the clan tradition is to practice a certain field of magic, and a child veers off, they're cut loose. Though the phrase for that is a lot more ceremonial."

"Would that be in any of the books?" Harry blinked.

"Erh," the older boy scratched his chin, "I can't think of which one. Look, I'll ask Cho if she knows, I think she's either done research or would know someone who has, and then I'll get word back to you."

"Okay," the brunet child wondered how the two older Seekers were on good terms, then sighed. He supposed he was the only Seeker that had an issue with Chang. He might not, if it weren't for the fact that she had a tendency to wait for her counterpart to find the Snitch before she tried going after it.

"I'd suggest going back to your Common Room, I think Filch might be performing a celebratory round of the school, with Mrs. Norris," Diggory chuckled.

Nodding, Harry thanked him and headed down the hall. When he reached the Common Room, it occurred to him that both times he'd asked about clans, the people around him had been rather evasive. After a few thoughts in that vein, he decided to approach someone else concerning the matter.

"Lochner?" addressing the Prefect whom had just missed being Head Girl, he waited for her to turn her attention from her book.

"Yes, Potter?" the girl placed a bookmark where she left off.

"I ran across a mention of clans, and have only been able to get glancing information about them," the Second Year fidgeted, expecting another vague answer and a quick dash off.

"Wow, Potter, you sure get right to the hard questions, don't you?" she sighed.

"Er?" Harry rubbed his head.

"There isn't a lot known about clans, aside from what they are willing to share publicly," Lochner explained, "The last known member of a clan to live out in the Wizarding world was a member of the 'Tir' clan, and he was later Bereft."

"Why do I get the feeling that 'Bereft' is a process rather than a verb in this case?" the preteen grizzled.

"You're right." Now grinning, the young woman continued, "In most cases, bereft is what a person is when they're suffering from grief. They've lost something, someone, or something like that. In regards to a clan, however, Bereft means, effectively, that they've been booted from the family tree. Rather like Wizarding families burning names from their tapestries."

"Why?" Harry flopped into a nearby chair, completely flummoxed.

"Clans have traditions they uphold," Lochner pointed out, "To break one often results in being 'Bereft' of one's place in the clan. Does that clarify?"

"So if this person of the Tir clan was removed from the clan," Harry started to puzzle the information together.

"No, they wouldn't have been removed from the clan, they would have just lost their place in it." The Seventh Year corrected.

"What's the difference?" he yelped.

"It's like being disowned versus being burned off the tapestry, Potter," Flint grumbled as he sat up from the couch in front of the fireplace. Harry supposed the older boy had been napping, and his yelp had woken him.

"I knew I was using the wrong analogy," Lochner opened her book and waved it in the direction of the Quidditch Captain, "Go ask him for more details, he might be better help."

Muttering under his breath, the boy moved to sit closer to the Chaser.

"I don't know much more than she does, but I know that the clan member she was referring to was Bereft because he'd accepted his letter to Hogwarts." Flint shook his head, "Some of the clans don't like the rest of the Wizarding world, and isolate themselves. The Tir clan was one of them, I suppose."

"So what did the person do after they were Bereft?" Harry curled into the chair and focused on his teammate.

"Well, his last name would have changed, at the least, but other than that, I don't know." Flint leaned back. "You'll have to ask one of the Professors if they know who it was, and who they are now."

At that point, the rest of the students of Slytherin House filtered in, and their chatter distracted the small group. Shortly, they all came to the realization that it was curfew, so the Prefects made a quick round up of their House mates and shunted everyone off to bed.

It wouldn't be until the next day that Harry would realize he'd distracted himself from the knowledge of the petrification victims' restoration.

A month and change late. I'm sooooo sorry guys. Really. I'd offer to do something extra to make up for it, but I don't feel safe in doing so. Especially as I can't promise that it won't be another couple of weeks before the next chapter comes out.

I've had a couple of you guys ask if I'm okay, and I'd like to reassure you that I am. To my knowledge. Thanks so much for the concern, well wishes, and the check ups. I got the most recent one, and looked at my roommate, saying 'I need to get my back end in gear and get that next chapter finished.' So here it is.

Midterms this quarter snuck up on me and bit me hard. I'm rather expecting finals to do the same. All the same, I hope to keep from slumping out for another month, seeing as I have about four weeks left of classes. The bad news is that if I get this 'year' done, I will take the entire month between quarters off to outline and prepare some chapters. I figure I owe you guys a chapter for one thousand, for twelve hundred fifty reviews, and for the four weeks I missed. So that's at least six chapters to post right off for Third Year. When I get that far, I will also know whether the years will be two-by-two, or all-in-one.

For yet-another-Gaara-fangirl: Your biweekly check ups paid off!

Quick preview of what I hope to get done in a week:

Harry meets his guardian, finds out why said guardian was kept from finding out about their appointment. He also (hopefully) finishes the year, and gets to find out what his housing situation is. If I can work it in, the Headmaster reveals whether (or not) he'll be at Hogwarts for Harry's Third Year, and with any luck, this will be the last chapter of 'book two'. But I'm not holding my breath.

The next morning, the assembled students of Hogwarts were treated to the return of faces that had been missing for part of the year. Some of the reunions were kept quieter than others. The Hufflepuff table held smiles on their faces on the return of Finch-Fletchley, but didn't cheer raucously like the Gryffindors.

After everyone settled, the Headmaster stood. "With the return of our fellows, I would like to thank all of our students for their patience and hard work tending the Mandrakes all year. Ten points to all four Houses. The diligent nocturnal observers and minders will earn five points apiece for their efforts."

Professor Dumbledore continued, "Understandably, the amount of work our two newly returned students will need to carry out to catch up would prevent proper scoring of their year-end tests. I suggest that the informal study group is a fine method to catch up for next year. Any number of students in the group would be willing, I'm sure, to assist you. Should either of you be willing to take the tests at the beginning of next term, please drop a message off with me. Otherwise we will consider the grades as passing."

A brief pause, and the man nodded to the room in general and waved a hand, indicating they should commence eating.

Roughly halfway through his oatmeal, Harry felt someone standing behind his left shoulder. A quick glance around him showed that it was not a Slytherin, as most of them were raising eyebrows. The other members of the Quidditch team, while not glaring, weren't exactly providing a friendly atmosphere, which gave the Seeker the feeling it was a Gryffindor. Hoping it wasn't Granger trying to apologize again, he turned.

"Ah, M-mister Potter," Colin Creevey stuttered, with a shy smile, "I want to thank you for helping Neville with the Mandrakes while you could during the year, and for taking care of the snake- basilisk, wasn't it?"

Nodding, Harry swallowed his mouthful of food before speaking. "Was that all?"

"No," Creevey's face split into a grin, shy though it was, "I wanted to ask if you knew of anyone in your study group who could help me. I'm so far behind, Percy and Oliver can't really do much, so I was hoping someone could work with me- or, or several someones if that works better."

Blinking, the slightly older boy thought for a moment, "What times do you think you'll have free?"

The smile on the camera-happy face was almost enough to blind a person, and Harry thought briefly that it was no wonder Creevey liked cameras. They flashed just as brightly. The musing thoughts were interrupted by a sheet of paper thrust in his face, gently.

"Oh, sorry, but that's my course schedule," the First Year was still smiling, "I'm not entirely sure how much catching up we'll be able to do considering we'll have the first week of next term, but I'm willing to work."

Smirking, Flint snatched at the schedule and glanced at it, "That's all we can ask, Creevey. Looks like your open times coincide with mine today. My strengths are Charms and Astronomy, so I'll work with you on that. Did they already give you the coursework?"

The First Year's eyes went wide for a second. Then he reached into his bag again and pulled a sheaf of papers out to dig through. After a few seconds of searching he pulled two sets out and handed them over.

"Ah," Flint smirked as he looked through the pages, "We'll have you through those in no time, unless these are your worst subjects?"

Shaking his head, Creevey quickly pointed out, "No, my worst subjects are History and Transfiguration."

"Good news is, I know how to work Muggle post," Landale's face held a similar expression, "So I should be able to get you through your other subjects."

"Thankyou!" The budding photographer was so giddy that he made to dash off, leaving his assignments and schedule behind, but for Bletchley's hand holding him back.

"Don't forget this paperwork," the older boy grumbled, "You might be able to get a start on it if you've got it with you."

"Oh!" nodding, Creevey gathered the papers and put them back into his bag, and dashed off.

"That went rather well, to be honest," Warrington mumbled.

"Potter, your crusade to show the rest of the school what we're really like might actually get to start working," Montague chuckled.

"Hm. I'll believe it when they quit staring at us like we've got tattoos already." Flint muttered, though Harry rather got the feeling he wasn't supposed to have heard.

Standing, Harry decided it was time to head to class. He'd have left the table but for another approaching him. This time it was the newly recovered Hufflepuff petrifaction victim. A sheepish look covered his face in a low flush, though he kept casting mild glares at his table. Finch-Fletchley came to a stop in front of the Slytherin Seeker, and paused.

Taking a deep breath, the Hufflepuff began, "I'm sorry I ever believed you could have been the Heir of Slytherin, and I want to thank you for taking care of the creature before it killed anyone. If you-

Harry interrupted the other boy, "If you're going to apologize, please mean it. But really, you don't have to, because its not like you were doing anything different. Nearly everyone thought I was the person behind it all."

"I really do mean it when I say I'm sorry! I should have known better! After all, you have never done anything like what the older students say Slytherins like to do to the other Houses. In fact, you seem to have gotten them to stop being so snide-

Harry sighed and interrupted the other boy again, "This conversation isn't going to go anywhere."

With that, he dodged around Finch-Fletchley, and headed to his first class of the morning. He thought it rather ironic that the two Muggle-born boys could have such different reactions to the situation. One was genuinely grateful for something Harry had little to do with except as in clearing up a problem, and the other was obviously only apologizing because he'd been told to. He asked himself why were the majority of the people in the Wizarding world so determined to hate or be disgusted by Slytherins but couldn't come up with an answer outside of the Pureblood beliefs being misunderstood. Seeing as he wasn't completely sure he understood them, Harry could only guess, but his musings were cut short when class began.

This late in the week, Harry only had one test to take during the morning schedule. He sat in his Transfiguration class, and waited. After McGonagall set the questions in front of them, admonishing them to keep their eyes on their own papers, she set them to work. She would call a name, she warned, and said student was to turn their test over, and come up to her desk, where she would give them the practical portion of the exam. They would then return to their desk and finish the written portion.

Harry was so absorbed in his test that he almost missed when his name was called. Cheeks warmer than usual, he flipped the parchment over and moved to sit in front of the Gryffindor Head of House.

"First, Mister Potter," McGonagall reached over and passed him a note, "From the Headmaster, you are to read it after class, and only then. Next," she removed a small stone from a box and set it on the desk. "Transfigure this into a wood carving of a robin."

A little bit of work, and some skimming through the book of animals that McGonagall kept up there for this test left Harry standing across from the woman with a small block of wood roughly hewn into the form of a red-breasted robin. She picked it up and gently tapped it onto the desk top, and nodded. The sound was wood hitting wood, not rock.

"Now Transfigure it back," she nodded, and then nodded again when Harry had returned the robin to a rock. She replaced the rock, and then pulled out a teapot, "This should be a set of cups and saucers with the same pattern. Four pieces at minimum, but if you can get four of each, you will get extra credit."

Gingerly, the boy picked up the porcelain object and studied it. He turned it around a couple of times, until he thought he'd learned all the bits of the pattern, and then set it back down, just as gently. A moment or two later, he was pleasantly surprised by the three saucers with matching cups sitting in front of him, oddly enough, all holding tea.

Chuckling, McGonagall said "It is not necessary to try to feed me tea, Mister Potter, but I suppose it is only to be expected. You are, after all, a growing boy, and I'm sure are quite hungry at this point. Transfigure them back, if you would, and please do not lose the tea."

Relaxing only after it was over, he scrawled back to his station and finished scribbling out his test answers. Upon finishing, he turned his test over and set the questions pages upon it, and took a deep breath.

When the class ended, he picked up the paper and headed out of the room. While keeping an eye out for obstacles, he read it. 'It has been decided that formal custody of your person should be handed over to one Kane Alen. He will be arriving today after supper to introduce himself to you. It is his hope, that at this time, you two will also be able to discuss how this summer will flow for you both. His parents were, while not exactly friends of your parents, at the least allies. To ensure your safety, Headmaster Dumbledore will be present, as will your Head of House. Professor Snape will escort you to the Headmaster's office.' A knot formed in Harry's stomach. He'd already heard a little of the man, or at least of his family, but wasn't sure what to expect. Frankly, he wondered if the man would explain clans better, or if he'd be as content to keep Harry in the dark as the Dursleys.

Lunch rolled around, and Finch-Fletchely had evidently been coached to try again, because he was standing by Harry's usual seat at the benches. With a sigh, Harry stopped nearby and waited.

"Potter, the way I tried to apologize this morning came out wrong," the Hufflepuff started. "I'll start this time by saying I really am sorry I thought you were the Heir. Everything I've read about Slytherin says his Heir would have had control of the creature, and for you to have been in the wrong places at the wrong times, well. Being that I'm acquainted with the movies that use red herrings to keep people from knowing who really committed crimes, I should have known better than to jump to conclusions. Even if it was strange to see you talking to the snake."

Only vaguely knowing of the movies Finch-Fletchley referenced, Harry hesitated. The Dursleys certainly wouldn't have allowed him to watch, but he'd had to read a few of the 'classics' in school, and there had been some Sherlock Holmes stories in there, so he did know what a red herring was. Finally he nodded, "Okay. I'll take that one."

Sighing in relief, the other boy added, "And the other bit, well. I didn't say it very well, but we hear all kinds of stories about the pranks Slytherins would pull, and the cheating they did in Quidditch, but since you've been here..."

"They're humoring me, you should know," Harry's cynicism caused more than a few winces in the older students, but he didn't see them.

Finch-Fletchley did, and his eyes widened, "People hate Slytherins and you've been trying to get that to stop, but even you're almost burnt out, aren't you?"

"Live through this last year in my shoes and you'd see why," Harry nodded at the table, "Mind if I sit? I do have a class after this, so I need to eat."

"Oh! Sorry," the other Second Year mumbled and if Harry had looked back up, he'd have seen a look of determination cross his face.

"Potter," Malfoy was unusually hesitant, "What did you mean by they're 'humoring' you?"

"People can't change overnight," Harry sighed, "I know that. I've not been able to figure out quite why you all have been so willing to lay off the other Houses, going entirely to the defensive, like an armadillo, but I do know it's not in your nature."

"How do you know that?" Parkinson snapped, "Maybe we want to make peace and see you as a figurehead to do so? Perhaps we realize with you behind us, or in front of us, the rest of the world might actually begin to believe it? Could there possibly be a chance that while our traits are like that of a snake, we might also be willing to not bite?"

Blushing, Harry realized he'd made the others angry, "Sorry."

Flint snorted, "We know that, Potter. You're just boiling over. Hopefully this summer will be better for you."

"Yeah," Harry sighed again, and then wrinkled his nose, "Is it too much to hope for a quiet year next year?"

A snort nearby told him what everyone else thought.

As much as he wished his next class would both fly by and crawl past, Harry was only granted half his wish. He was half tempted to try walking slowly to counter the speed with which his last Charms class of the year had flown. Sighing to himself, he gave up that idea for a bad one, and headed to his Common Room. Where he met some of the older students apparently chatting about their Defense tests.

Sitting nearby, Harry unabashedly eavesdropped on the details of a Fourth Year Defense exam. Some of the spells he'd heard of before, thanks to last year, and some of the study sessions he'd been through this year. Tyler definitely taught to a different tune, as most of the spells were shield and counter-oriented. Quirrell's spells had all been purely defensive hexes. He'd even taken the lessons of the Weasley brothers into account, though it didn't seem like there was much information from Lockhart.

As the voices droned, the Seeker nodded off, though he was unaware of this until Flint leaned over him and said, "Wake up."

A yip, jump and Flint narrowly dodging a flung out hand left nearly everyone in the room chuckling. Harry even thought it was funny, though he took a few extra breaths to return his heart rate to normal.

Supper was unlike lunch or breakfast, as no one approached the Slytherin table that wasn't going to sit at it. Recent experiences had taught Harry to be wary, so he kept looking around. After the sixth time he did so, Malfoy snapped, "Potter we'd warn you if anyone was coming, so stop it."

"Why? You never have before," Harry mumbled into his juice.

"We have too," Zabini snickered, "It's not our fault if you don't read silence as a warning."

"You're all so quiet anyway, I can't tell have the time when you aren't talking," Harry looked up.

"I have to ask, Potter," Flint's voice seemed sharp, and it drew the Second Years' gazes like a magnet, "Are you trying to push us away?"

Blinking, Harry thought about what might have brought the question to the surface. He realized that the last few days he'd been rather brusque and downright rude. Sighing, he rubbed the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses, "No. I'm sorry. I'm just-"

"Finch-Fletchley was right," Montague spoke up, "You are about to burn out."

"Sorry," Harry sighed, "I should-"

"Not another word, Potter," Parkinson snapped, "You're going to listen to us."

Blinking, Harry's eyes flew to the usually calm girl, and stared.

"Good. Now that I have your attention," she looked around, and then continued, "I don't much care about anyone else's view, but with what

your home life is like, I can see why being subjected to more of it has you on the edge. With that in mind, I can only say that you shouldn't lash out at us. We might decide that even with you in our ranks, that we like the way things were."

Wincing, Harry opened his mouth, only to be silenced by Bulstrode.

"I can say that I like the fact that the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs are actually looking at us as people now, rather than extensions of some disease," the larger girl pointed out, "And it seems to be something that spans all years of both Houses, and they're starting to look at all of our years too."

"If you give up, so will they," Landale added from her side of the table, "It's more or less a losing battle then."

"Why do I have to be the mascot for this?" Harry muttered.

"That's what you get for starting it," Malfoy smirked, "But I'll tell you, my father is incensed that you're doing this. At least, I think it's because it's you, rather than me."

"And you don't care?" Harry looked askance at his roommate.

"I've been raised to behave in the manner for which we are hated," the blond sighed, "So there's not enough for me to make a change with."

Parkinson decided to continue her thread of thought, "What you started last year, left scars in their view of us, planted seeds of the ability to see us differently. The fact that you weathered through this year, and kept behaving in much the same way as before widened the cracks and may have nurtured the seeds into small plants. Yes, you have a responsibility to keep up the behavior, but at the same time-"

"Forgive my interruption," an older voice sent all of the students at that end of the table into jumping fits. Tyler's face carried humor, though his mouth stayed fairly flat, "Couldn't help but hear your topic as I walked to fetch Mister Potter for his meeting with the Headmaster.

It's not his responsibility to keep up the behavior. It's just his job to be himself. At this point, if you all want the changes to happen, you have to help him. More actively than just standing beside him when things come at him. Some of you will have to be his shields, others will have to use their own voices, learn to stand on their own, and ask for their own shields. That's at least part of the reason it's not working very well. Not just the fact that you've got about a thousand years of miasma to work through."

The students looked at him, in varying degrees of shock, and Harry actually felt a weight removed from his shoulders. The Defense instructor had just said what Harry wanted to, and judging by the victorious look on Parkinson's face, it was what she had been about to say as well. The adult stepped back and motioned Harry to follow him.

Reaching the office, Tyler smirked and said, "I think the young lady was about to say what I said for her, so I made them hear it from an adult instead. Some of them might have argued her into a standstill otherwise."

"Sir?" Harry blinked and looked at the gargoyle.

"When I was at this school, someone else tried to do just what you've done, but no one helped him," Tyler shrugged, "He gave up after the first year, took to avoiding everyone, stayed in the library for all hours. I never heard what he did during summers, as he had no family to go to, but I know he's since gone into research in one of the departments in the ministry. He's still anti-social, enough that he makes Professor Snape seem positively friendly."

"Speaking of which," the Potions Master spoke from behind the two already in the hall, "Why did you bring him here? I was informed that it would be my task, only to find he'd already been fetched."

"I was walking past and heard them coaching him to continue trying to get people to believe better of Slytherins," shaking his head, the younger man continued, "I think they were about to tell him, 'thanks for the effort, don't quit, but we won't help you,' or something like that."

“Hm,” Snape paused, “Three Musketeers.” The gargoyle moved out of the way, and the three walked up the staircase in silence. At least until the Slytherin Head completed his thoughts and spoke up. “It seems to me, that we might want to ask your guardian if he’d be willing to introduce you to Ryan Tir.”

The name jogged a memory, and it connected just as they reached Dumbledore’s office. He resolved to think more on it later, after he’d been introduced to the man sitting in one of four chairs opposite the Headmaster’s desk.

Both men stood, and Dumbledore waved a hand, “Good to see you’ve made it, would any of you like tea, perhaps, to soothe possible parched throats?”

When all four declined, and had found their chairs, the new face spoke up, “My name, even if you already know it, is Kane Alen. I’d welcome you to the clan, but Ministry bylaws preclude it being a clan when there’s only one living individual. If I could get certain individuals to file the paperwork, there would be more than one, and I could reinstate the clan, but that’s aside from the point. I learned a few weeks ago that your parents had signed custody of you to my parents. Incidentally, as they are deceased as well, we will have to settle with me taking care of you.”

Dumbledore looked to the pale-haired man, and asked, “Does this mean you are reluctant?”

“I would like to be sure of his willingness to return with me to a rather remote area of the country,” Mr. Alen leaned back into his chair, “After all, what good would it do to take him from the people who’ve been caring for him thus far if he doesn’t want to leave?”

“You didn’t tell him?” Harry’s outburst surprised everyone in the room.

“Ah, Harry,” Dumbledore sighed, “I thought it best for him to meet you, make a judgment of his own, first, before telling him about the Dursleys.”

"What is it I'm ignorant of this time?" Kane grumbled.

A quiet noise caused Harry to sneak a peek at the Defense instructor. For one, he wasn't sure why the man was here, and for another he had no clue as to what was so humorous.

"The current individuals in charge of Mister Potter's well-being are Muggles who feel magic is the act of freaks, and that the child under their roof that they did not put there is no more than a burden," Snape's voice was low, and if Harry didn't know better, he'd say it had been hissed.

"Ah," Alen nodded, then looked at the Second Year, who found himself meeting dark eyes. They looked like they might have blue in them somewhere, but that thought just skimmed the surface of his mind, as he hoped the man wouldn't turn out like the Dursleys. He really didn't want to live with that again, but right now, he didn't see any alternatives. Professor Snape seemed to know something about Kane Alen, and so did Tyler. That thought made him relax a little. Then he blinked. The feeling he got as he met this man's eyes were like the times when he'd met the Headmaster's and the Potions Master's. Which made him blink again and turn his gaze away, trying to think what the three could have in common.

"If it weren't for the fact that I'm sure it's been done for his benefit," Kane groused, "I'd say you should watch out for issues concerning a certain mind magic. He's not only becoming conscious of it, but is going to begin actively researching it soon."

Now Harry knew he was being told something obliquely, even before Tyler's stifled snicker. Mind magic gave him a topic, though that might not help much if people were determined to keep him from finding out.

"Ah," Dumbledore quite obviously knew what the topic danced around was meant to be, and nodded. "In that case, you should be quite happy to learn, that barring circumstances where it is otherwise unavoidable, Mister Potter should not be in any danger of exposure to it any longer. Unless through expressed consent on your part, should you take him in."

"I wouldn't have come here if I weren't going to," the chuckle issued after that statement left Harry glancing at the man again, briefly. "He doesn't have any more testing for tomorrow, does he?"

Shaking his head hesitantly, Harry wondered why the man wanted to know.

"I'll sign the papers tonight, with Professor Snape, and Mr. Tyler as witnesses. Then I'll go with whomever we need to the Slytherin Common Room to wait as Mister Potter packs. It's a long trip, and I think it best to get over with as soon as possible," Kane Alen explained, "I do believe if we leave early tomorrow I'll still be able to get the paperwork turned in to all parties concerned before the weekend, and will have formal custody acknowledged by the Ministry by the start of next week."

"You cannot take him with you without the paperwork being filed," Dumbledore explained.

"Ah, but it is allowed as a provisional act," Alen smirked, "As long as a member of the faculty of this school is present on the grounds, it is still acceptable. I'm sure I could get even Professor McGonagall to help us if I asked. She seemed quite eager to see Mister Potter settled into a different home. Also seemed happy to give me a few projects to give him during the break."

Sighing and resting back in his chair, the Headmaster nodded, and as Kane Alen turned the signed paper over, he pulled a quill and signed with no more words spoken. They then directed Harry to sign, saying he was willing to at least attempt making this exchange of custody work, and left the other two adults to sign afterwards.

"Enjoy your summer, Mister Potter," Dumbledore called as the four younger males left the room. At the doorway, Tyler turned and said something that Harry didn't quite catch, hustled along as he was by Professor Snape and Mr. Alen.

By the time they reached the Common Room, the Defense instructor had caught up with the other three and Harry listened as the adults held a conversation, that was over his head on multiple fronts.

He did resolve, however to research both that mind magic mentioned in the meeting, and this Occu-something that the three were talking about as soon as he could get away with it.

Upon entering the Common Room, which fell silent, Snape looked around the room and then began giving instructions to all there.

"Mister Potter will be leaving in the morning, so if any of you have messages to deliver to him that absolutely cannot wait, do so now. He would also appreciate assistance in packing his belongings, I'm sure, so if any of you have favors to ask, this might be a good time to pay your half of the trade-off."

"Never would have guessed it would get so brazen," Alen mumbled, "When I was here, we suspected that Slytherins lived on barter, but to have it confirmed!"

"Potter," Flint stood from his chair, where he'd been working on homework, "Creevey wanted you to have this." He handed over a small book, filled with pictures, mixed between Muggle and Magic. Flipping it open, he saw classmates, with little notes jotted underneath their names. Turning pages, he realized that the notes were comments on subjects they could help with or needed help with, and then spotted the note in the back.

Reading it, Harry then looked up, grinning, "This is going to make things easier, so much easier!"

"What?" Flint tried to sneak a look at the book.

"If you didn't take the peek while you had it, you're certainly not seeing it now until next year," the younger boy teased.

"Go on, pack your things," Snape waved a hand towards the sleeping rooms.

"Sir, I've been packed all week, left out only the clothes needed for this week, and have been packing them into a side bag to be washed when I got- well, there." Harry grinned. He knew he was making people nervous with his sudden cheer, but he had somewhere to go that wasn't the Dursley's, and he'd gotten something that would make the study system work a lot easier, so he was rather happy, even bordering on ecstatic.

"You won't be getting any sleep tonight, will you, Potter?" Tyler chuckled.

"Probably not," the Potions Master sighed, "Pity you two can't leave earlier than stated."

"I'll settle down, I promise," Harry sheepishly grinned, and then sat down on one of the chairs in the room, pulling a text from his bag, "See, I'll just get started on the summer assignments, then, okay?"

"See you in the morning then, Mister Potter," Alen turned and chuckled as he left the room, with Tyler in tow, as his guide to the rarely used guest rooms of Hogwarts.

Even though Harry had promised to work on his summer break work, he never got a chance to put pencil, or quill, to paper. The others in the room abandoned their studying, even Seventh Years, to as who the stranger had been, and the Second Year Seeker was left to explain it to them. Finally, it came time to sleep, and Harry packed away his things in preparation for the trip in the morning.

"Quick preview of what I hope to get done in a week," Famous last words! I'm so sorry it took this long. Finals snuck up on me, and then I found myself unbelievably busy during the month break. Then I took this long to get back into the groove, so here's the last chapter of year two, of What if, the first section, and hopefully I haven't disappointed you all too much.

There will be a break between now and the next posting. Meanwhile I will change the name of this story in a week or so. It will change from "What if?" to "What if the world turned its head sideways." There is a continuation/sequel, which will span the remaining years, and

hopefully won't break 100 chappies. (Really I don't want more than fifty, but I'll be realistic.) The 'sequel' will be "and squinted one eye?" Should it get too long, I might break it some more, in which case, I'll think up some continuation of the title. So far, I'm thinking the names will go something like "What if the world turned its head sideways, and squinted one eye, as they all raise their hand," but that's a rough guess. I won't post even one chapter of the next section until I'm at least three-quarters done according to the outline I want to write up. That way, I'm less likely to have a repeat of this. Though I hope to keep the weekly updating schedule I had before this- er, long bout of a hiccup, when I do get started again. Sorry again, thanks for your time, and hope you enjoyed.